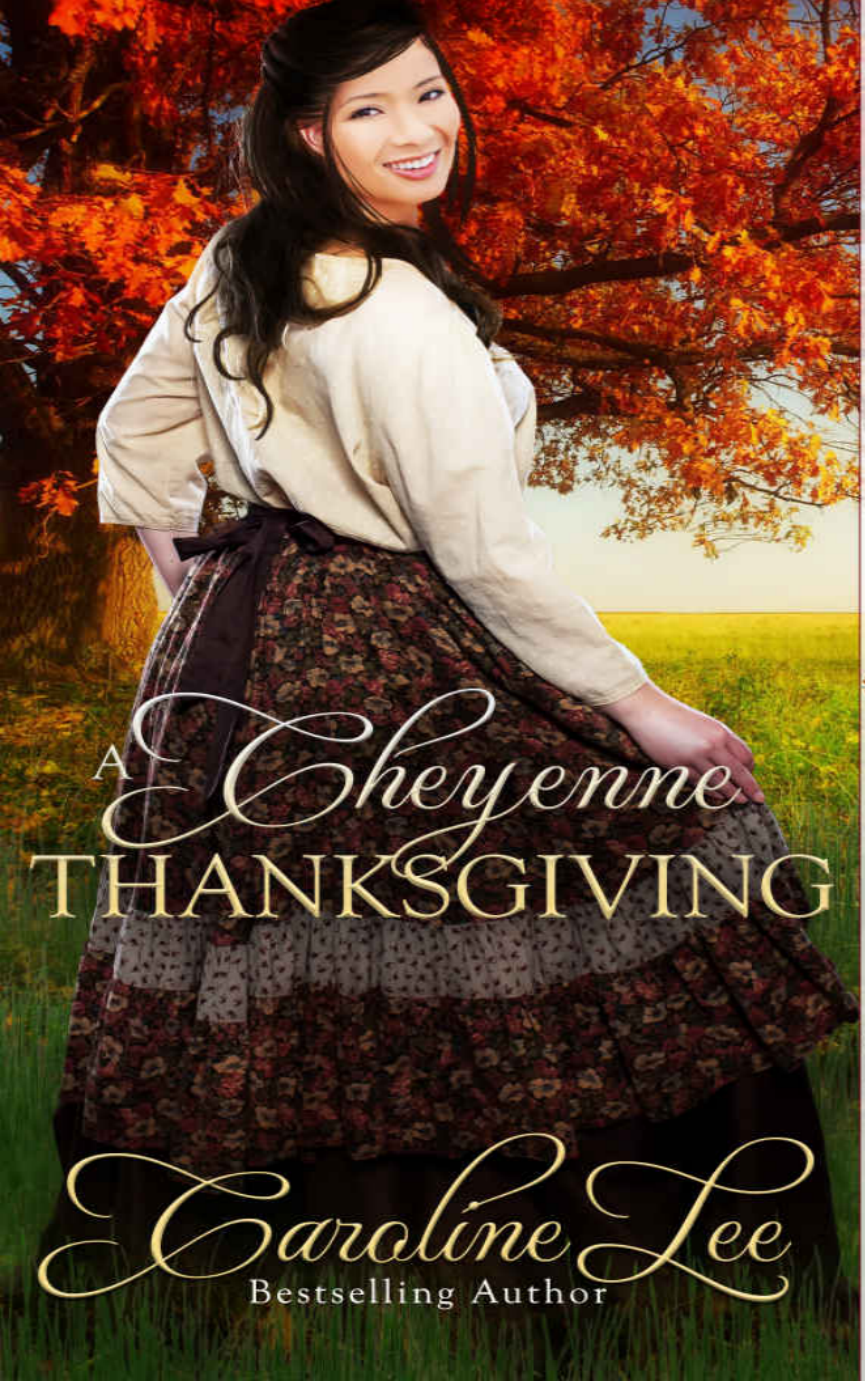


A Cheyenne THANKSGIVING

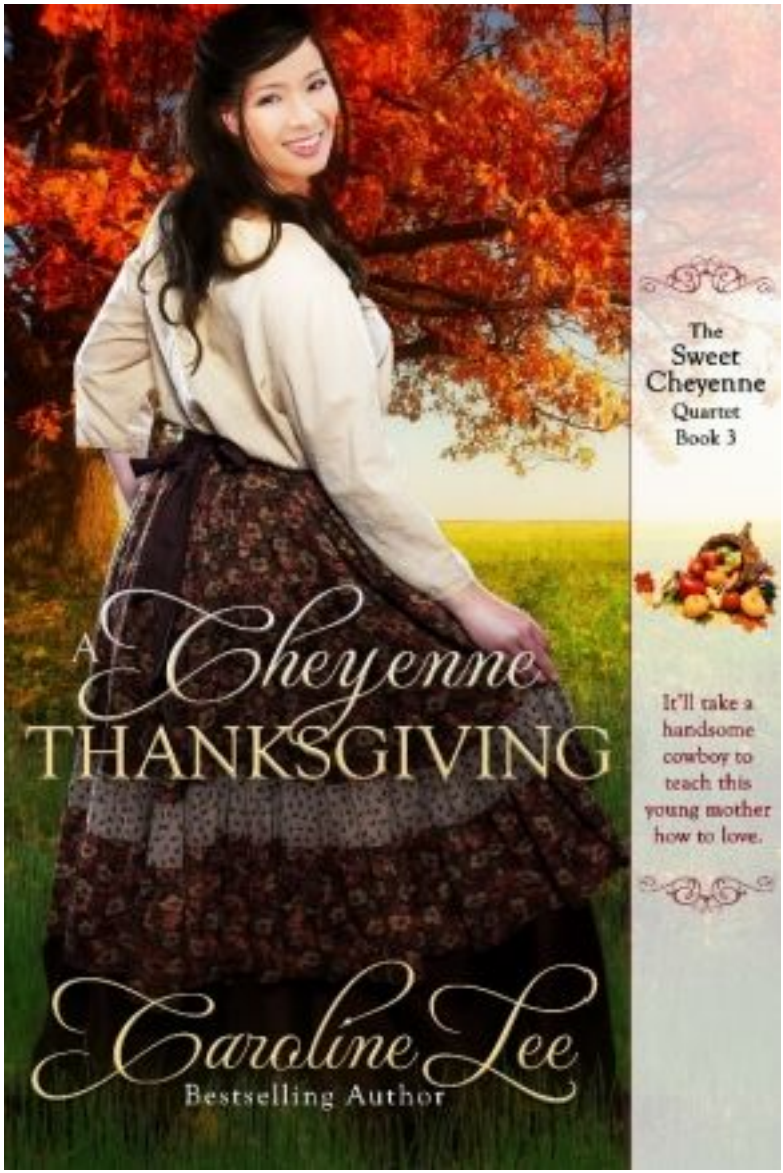
Caroline Lee

Bestselling Author

The Sweet Cheyenne Quartet Book 3



It'll take a handsome cowboy to teach this young mother how to love.


A Cheyenne THANKSGIVING
Caroline Lee
Bestselling Author
The Sweet Cheyenne Quartet Book 3
It'll take a handsome cowboy to teach this young mother how to love.

A Cheyenne Thanksgiving



Other works by Caroline Lee

The Sweet Cheyenne Quartet

A Cheyenne Christmas
A Cheyenne Celebration
A Cheyenne Thanksgiving
A Cheyenne Christmas Homecoming
Where They Belong: A Sweet Cheyenne Christmas Novella
The Mothers of Sweet Cheyenne: A short story collection

Everland Ever After

Little Red (Rojita + Hank)
Ella (Ella + Ian)
Beauty (Arabella + Vincenzo)

Sign up for Caroline's Newsletter to receive exclusive content and freebies, as well as first dibs on her books!

Copyright © 2014, Caroline Lee
CarolineLeeRomance@gmail.com

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author.

First edition: 2014

This work is made available in e-book format by Amazon Kindle at www.amazon.com
And in paperback format by CreateSpace at www.createspace.com

Printing/manufacturing information for this book may be found on the last page

Cover: EDHGraphics

For my children;
my loves,
my inspirations and
my cheerleaders.

But especially for Jacob,
who once asked me for a small favor:
“Mommy, can your next story
be about a little boy
with my name, please?”

CHAPTER ONE



August, 1882

They were planning something horrible.

Tess was packing up the leftovers from dinner when she heard the men she'd been traveling with—men she'd known and trusted for months—planning to do her the deepest harm. They were around the far campfire, and didn't see her on this side of the wagon. They'd been drinking as well, and probably didn't realize how loudly they were speaking. Or that she could hear their plans.

"Whatdya mean 'hold her down'?"

"She's jest a tiny little thing. Ain't gunna be too hard." Tess couldn't hear well enough to know who was speaking. She stood still in shock, straining to hear more, but dreading it.

"All I'm saying," that was one of Willis' favorite phrases, so it had to be the foreman speaking, "is that she's a fighter."

"You think so?" That was Crowley, the new hand. She'd only met him four weeks before, and didn't know him as well as the others, but wouldn't have thought he'd be the type to press his attentions on a woman.

"Yeah, she's a spitfire alright. It ain't gunna be easy."

"What about you, kid?"

"No secret I want her." Stanley was two years younger than her, and Tess had known he was sweet on her. But she never would have thought he'd do something so… so brutal. So terrible. She should have been terrified, but found herself listening with a detached horrified fascination. She was numb, listening to them discuss how they were going to go about raping her. The sack of leftover biscuits hung unheeded from her hands, and she barely heard Jacob singing to himself as he poked holes in the dirt with his favorite stick. All she could do was stand, frozen, and listen with a kind of morbid curiosity, as if they were speaking about the weather.

Stanley's voice again, and the sound of liquid in bottle. "What about the boy? She'd shut up fast enough if she thought he was in trouble."

"I figure we hit him real hard, and he'd stay out of our way."

"Nah, he's the key to getting her to cooperate."

"All I'm saying is, she'll lie real still if she thinks the kid's…"

Tess wasn't sure if Willis had stopped talking, or if the blood pounding in her ears just drowned him out. Jacob! The sudden fear dragged her gaze towards her son. But he was fine, still oblivious of the threat, happy as only a two-year-old in dirt could be. Still, hearing the men discuss how to 'handle' him had snapped her out of her daze.

Her heart was beating so fast that she was sure she would throw up, and she had to force herself to take deeper breaths. She couldn't focus on the anger or fear… she had to hear what they were planning. She had to find a way to outwit them.

"How's about we jest wait 'til the boy's asleep? Hell, wait 'til she's asleep too, then just grab her? Tell her we'll hurt him good if she don't lie real still?"

"Yeah, I like that. Pass the whiskey." They quieted, and Tess squeezed her eyes shut. When she opened them, the world looked the same, but she knew it wasn't. She couldn't un-hear what they'd said, and had to do something to ensure they could never, *ever* hurt Jacob.

Slowly, deliberately, she finished tying up the biscuits, and then methodically wrapped up the remainder of the fowl in the oilskin. She'd planned to fry both of them up for breakfast tomorrow, but now wasn't sure she'd be able. Would she still be the cattle drive's cook in the morning? Or would what they planned to do to her mean she wouldn't be able to function? Would she still be alive, come the morning?

She glanced at Jacob again, and winced. He couldn't afford for her to give up. For his sake, she had to find a way to fight these men. She wasn't going to let them hurt him to get to her.

How had she misjudged them so badly? She'd known Willis for almost six months, since he had started coming to the store whenever he was in town. He'd always been friendly and trustworthy. When he found out her trouble, he had offered her a spot on the next drive south, and she didn't have to deliberate long. Why, even Mrs. Patullie had vouched for him! She was sure she would be safe with him. And Stanley had brought her flowers *twice*. She'd thought he was sweet!

But cursing her own poor judgment wasn't going to save her now. She had to decide what to do. The men had quieted now, but she could still hear the clink of the whiskey bottle and the occasional bursts of laughter. Had they been serious? Were they really planning on raping her, on threatening her baby to get what they wanted from her? Or had it just been idle pratter, fueled by boredom and liquor?

She couldn't take the risk of being wrong. She had to treat the threat as a real one, and get her son to safety. But how? They were four days from Fort Fetterman and the dubious civilization it offered,

and another week to Cheyenne. The men had waited until they were in the middle of nowhere before voicing their plans. Whether it had been deliberate or not, their isolation worked to their advantage just the same. She hadn't seen a ranch or homestead in the last three days, and there was no one to whom she could turn for help.

Her .32 was in the wagon, but hadn't been fired in months. She knew it was loaded, and knew how to use it, but didn't much like it. Joshua had insisted she know how to take care of herself, and it had been a useful threat several times since his death, when men had tried to accost her. But she'd always been in a town then, with the trappings of civilization around her. She had a strong feeling that just waving the weapon at the three men wouldn't work this time. They'd likely laugh at her, and take it from her. Worse, once she introduced guns into the situation, one was more likely to go off… and she just couldn't risk that with Jacob so close.

No, she was going to have to outwit them. And without any sort of resources, anything—or anyone—she could threaten them with, her only hope lay in escape. She had to run, to leave the dubious safety of the cook wagon and the fires, and hope for the best. They'd come after her, but maybe they wouldn't catch her. And even if they did, maybe they would have lost their violent bent as the whiskey wore off.

She had one hope: Fort Laramie. She'd studied the maps before they'd left, and knew that it should be due east of their location, based on how far they'd come since Fetterman. The drive was headed south, to the depot in Cheyenne, and if she were to head towards Laramie, the men probably wouldn't bother to come after her. Driving several hundred head of cattle four days out of the way to pick up a stray cook and her son would be foolish. If she could get away from the drive, and the men, she had a chance to make it to Fort Laramie. She'd be safe there; but more importantly, so would Jacob. Willis, Crowley and Stanley couldn't hurt him to hurt her.

Tess was never one to dally. Once she had a plan, she acted. The biscuits and the wrapped meat fit easily into a cloth sack, with enough room for a few essentials. She packed quickly, one eye on Jacob and her ears pricked for further hints from the far campfire. Inside the wagon she lingered briefly over her trunk, knowing the loss of all of the clothing and personal items would cost her dearly. But she was nothing if not practical, and knew that everything inside could be replaced with time and money. She could make money, if she had time. And the only way to buy time was to leave the trunk. Still, she took her mother's silk scarf and her father's intricately carved opium pipe, because she couldn't bear to leave them behind.

Hanging the sack over one shoulder, and a canteen over the

other, she shrugged into her carrying sling. Now that Jacob was steady enough to walk on his own, she rarely had to carry him. But since joining this drive, she'd occasionally taken him for a stroll in the evening, to rock him to sleep. She hoped that if Willis saw her this evening, that's what he'd assume she was doing.

Jacob must be sleepy already; he'd rubbed his eyes at some point, and smeared dirt down one cheek. He didn't protest when she scooped him up and handed him his favorite blankie. As he nestled his head into the hollow of her shoulder, she hoped that he didn't understand what the beating of her heart meant.

He was used to the sling, and slid easily into the pouch of material, straddling her stomach and popping one dirty thumb into his mouth. She winced, but was glad that he was quiet. Ready now, she slipped the Smith and Wesson into the back of the sling, and shifted in various directions to make sure it wouldn't come loose… or worse, blow her backside off.

Taking a deep breath, Tess set off in a vaguely northerly direction, humming softly to Jacob. As she passed the second campfire —confident that Jacob's bulk hid the bags of provisions—she saw Crowley glance at her and then nudge Willis. The foreman probably didn't realize how loud his voice was when he said "Good, we'll let her put the kid to sleep first…"

Swallowing past a suddenly dry throat, Tess forced herself to keep her gait steady and calm, when all she really wanted to do was clutch her baby and run. But her act must have worked, because the men didn't say anything else about her.

She turned eastward as soon as she couldn't hear the men's laughter anymore, and gave the cattle a wide berth. Last thing she needed was to accidently step on something important and start up a commotion… or stampede. Once away from the fire she kept the vague glow of sunset at her back until the stars were clear enough to guide her. *Baba* used to take her away from the city to show her the pictures the stars made, and she knew how to find the one in the north that didn't move. She used to love the stories of Zhuque, the Vermilion bird of the South and Baihu, the White Tiger of the West, and occupied her mind by telling them to Jacob as he fell asleep against her chest. Once he was sleeping, though, she didn't have anything to distract her from the desperate situation she'd somehow landed in. Tess wrapped her arms around his bottom for better support, kept the North Star on her left shoulder, and walked.

And walked…and walked.

She was strong and there was enough moonlight for her to see where she was going. Still, she managed to stumble on hidden hollows and burrows several times, despite the way the plains seemed to

stretch out before her. Soon enough, the small of her back started to ache from carrying Jacob in front of her, and she regretted not slinging him across her back. She took more and more of his weight on her arms instead, and soon was exhausted. Her feet, even in their sturdy boots, began to ache, and then burn, and then faded to a dull ache once more.

She walked for hours, surely long enough for Willis and the others to have noticed her missing. What did they do when they realized she wasn't coming back? Were they riding after her right now? She'd surely left a clear trail, but there was nothing she could do about that. She somehow forced herself to walk faster.

It was probably only an hour before dawn when she stepped in a hole—an animal's den, probably—and fell. She just couldn't make herself get up again. Clutching Jacob to her, she slept, utterly spent.

The two-year-old started to squirm after dawn, and she untangled him from the sling just in time to help him unbutton his trousers. He was hungry, of course, but so was she; they each ate and drank a little before she sat him in the sling across her back—her shoulders and hips would carry most of his weight, rather than her aching back—and they set off again towards the rising sun. Tess hadn't had enough sleep, but she couldn't stop. The Laramie River was somewhere over *there*, and they had to reach it.

And so she walked, and walked.

Jacob wanted to get down to walk too, and when she wouldn't let him—she couldn't afford the delay—he threw a fit that lasted most of the morning. He didn't understand the danger they were in, and she didn't want to try to explain. She worried that his screams would travel back the way they came, and point Willis in their direction, but she couldn't make him hush. The only time she let him down was to eat or relieve himself, and he eventually tired himself out. She joined him for a brief nap when the sun was high in the sky, but he was awake before she felt refreshed. It was a bad idea to keep sleeping after he woke; Lord knows what kind of trouble an unsupervised, curious two-year-old could get into. She fed him again and set off.

Tess was hungry, but couldn't afford to eat much. The stolen food would have to last them both until they reached Fort Laramie, and she estimated at *least* another day of walking. Would she be able to last that long? She would have to. More than the constant pain in her feet and legs, it was the heat that bothered her. She'd been born in temperate San Francisco, and spent the last years in Montana Territory. The heat of a Wyoming August was fierce. Her mother's scarf helped tie her hair out of her face, but nothing could be done about the way her shirt stuck to her skin or the cotton skirt seemed to tangle around her knees. She was losing too much liquid from sweat,

and had to rely on finding streams to refill her canteen. Soon, she occupied her mind with prayers to find water.

That journey was the most grueling ordeal she had ever encountered, and it was made worse by Jacob. She was constantly terrified for him, and what would happen to him if she stopped and Willis and the other cowboys caught up. Or if she failed, collapsed and died out here, dooming him as well. His safety—his survival, now—relied on her decisions, and that was frightening. And he was just too young to understand *why* he couldn't run around, or why he couldn't eat more.

They walked most of the second night, too, and into the next day. The hours blurred together into a haze of dull terror and pain. The way Jacob's eyes started to grow listless terrified her, and she let him drink the rest of their water. She walked and walked, always eastward, seeing nothing but grass.

On the second evening, Jacob fell asleep early, and she allowed herself to sink gratefully into a doze. But it was just a nap for him, and the moon wasn't up too far in the sky before he woke, propelling her mechanically to her feet once more. They walked through the night.

Her son chattered himself to sleep again sometime well after midnight, but she forced herself to keep walking. She felt like a monster from one of *Baba's* stories; cursed to follow a command—walk east!—like a clockwork person. All she *wanted* to do was drink, sleep, and eat… in that order.

Thank goodness dawn had come by the time she stumbled on the riverbank; otherwise she surely would have tumbled in and drowned in the sluggish flow. As it was, it took all of her energy to refill the canteen, drink greedily, and refill again. One need sated, at least, she loosened Jacob in the sling, and lay down beside him, using the material to shade them both from the sun.

Right before she fell asleep, she prayed that they'd found the Laramie River. Because she couldn't take any more of this.



When Cam MacLeod heard the baby crying, he checked his canteen to make sure he'd had enough water, and wasn't hallucinating. But nope, there was barely any water left, which meant he *had* been drinking regularly in the heat. And judging from his sorrel's restlessness, he smelled the Laramie River up ahead, so they'd both be able to fill their guts again soon.

So it must have just been his mind playing tricks on him. He'd been thinking about holding little Rose, and those precious little

noises she still made, and that's probably why he thought he'd heard the cry. Despite reining in his horse and listening hard, the wind didn't bring him any other sounds, so he figured it was just his thoughts of the baby.

Little Rose had barely filled his palms when he'd first held her at a few weeks old. She'd been born so tiny, but was an angel, and he'd been totally besotted. He'd visited the Barker spread more often in the last months, and while he considered Ash and Nate his friends, no one doubted Rose was the one he was there to see. The two older boys were fun, too, but from the moment the baby had wrapped one small hand around his finger, Cam was lost. Holding her on his lap, seeing her gummy smiles and happy wavings… she filled him with wonder. On his last visit, a week ago, she'd tried to give him a kiss, and he was filled with a sudden and intense burst of longing. Ash must have seen something in his face, because he'd taken his daughter back from Cam, chuckling. "She'll be bossing you around soon enough, too. You're a family man."

Although Cam had said nothing, his friend was right. For a few years now, he'd felt like something was missing from his life. He'd worked hard to build his ranch, and kept a simple home with his father. There wasn't anything more that he *needed*, but he felt somehow… empty. Getting to know Ash and Molly and their family—their spread was north of his, but he hadn't known them very well until a few years back—had shown him what was missing. A family. More than anything he could imagine, he wanted the laughter, the tears, the loving that came with being part of a family. The MacLeods had been that sort of family, but Cam's older sisters had moved on and his mother had passed. He set out for Wyoming Territory to stake a claim on some land and make his father a home. But back in Ontario, at least, there were cousins and nieces and nephews and… well, *family*.

Holding Rose for that first time, and every time after that, he was filled with a longing for the acceptance and comfort a family offered. But he would have to find a good woman first, one who could love him enough to raise kids with him. He'd thought he had done that last year, when he tried courting Miss Serena Selkirk. She'd been his neighbor for years, and he'd seen her blossom into a stunningly pristine young woman. It wasn't until he spent time with her that he understood that she just wasn't the right woman for him. He'd thought that he loved her, and losing her to his new business partner had galled him. But now he knew that his feelings for her—that vague worshipful sense of admiration—weren't really love; he was just reacting to the most beautiful woman west of St. Louis.

Thinking about Serena, and the fool he'd made of himself over

her, left him shifting in embarrassment. So this time, when he heard the cry, he was happy to rein in the sorrel again, and focus on the wind. Sure enough, there was something that sounded like a baby coming from the northwest, and it hadn't been his imagination. He remembered an instance last summer, when he'd thought he'd heard an animal, but it'd turned out to be Rose's brother Noah. Could the opposite hold true? He'd heard animal cries that sounded human enough to wonder if the noise he was hearing might be some wounded creature.

But he couldn't afford to ride on by, just in case there *was* a kid out here somewhere. Besides, if he wasted an hour looking, he'd just get to the fort after sundown, and it'd hardly be the first time he'd ridden in the dark.

Clucking, he turned the sorrel westward, knowing he would run into the Laramie River a little sooner than he'd planned. He could follow it north, keeping an eye out for a baby, or whatever was making the sound.

CHAPTER ONE



When was the last time she had a nightmare? Tess's stomach was roiling, despite being empty, when she woke from a dream of being unable to protect her son from monsters. It had been horrible, and she needed to assure herself that the crying she'd heard in her sleep had just been part of the dream. Jacob was no longer tucked beside her, but even in her muddled state she recognized that he had probably woken and made a beeline for the food. That was probably what had woken her.

Still disoriented from the dream, she rolled over onto her back. And screamed.

Haloed by the sun, now high in the sky, there stood a giant of a man. His huge feet were planted firmly just inches from hers, and her eyes followed thickly corded legs and torso up to a head so high she couldn't see his features amid the glare. But that didn't matter, because far more terrifying than his size was the fact that he held her baby in his arms.

Perhaps it was the lingering effects of the nightmare, or the lack of sleep, or the limited food. Whatever the reason, she knew that she *had* to save her helpless son. She screamed again and, scrambling to her feet, launched herself at the giant.

Had she been thinking straight, she might have processed that Jacob was smiling, and that he didn't seem to be in any danger in the stranger's arms. But seeing a man holding him, so soon after her ordeal to protect him, left her irrational. She hit the stranger with her shoulder in his stomach, and barely registered his grunt of pain before trying to claw her way up his chest to her son. Her attack must have surprised him, though, because she felt him falling backwards just as his free arm snaked around her middle and clasped her tightly to him.

They hit the ground, hard, and she felt his breath *woosh* from his chest. The same chest she was now sprawled across in a parody of intimacy. She heard Jacob's giggle at the same time that she realized the stranger had protected them both from harm. Her son was still cradled against one giant shoulder, and seemed to be chewing something.

He was safe.

Tess forced herself to take a deep breath, and felt the terror loosen its grip on her heart. And then she looked up into the stranger's face, and felt herself go faint again.

He was… well, it was probably just her recent ordeal that made her first thought 'angelic', but she couldn't help it. He was big, and blonde, and his skin seemed to glow bronze in the sun. Surely this was the kind of creature her mother had told her stories about? An avenging angel come to earth to protect the innocent? But then she managed a breath, and saw the whiskers against his chin, and the crinkles at the corners of his green eyes, and knew that he was a flesh-and-blood man, after all.

A very hard man, judging from the muscles beneath her palms, and the corded forearm across her back. She was just about to start struggling when those striking eyes crinkled into a smile, and he said simply "Hi."

A flush swept across her face, and while she knew she shouldn't be embarrassed by her actions to defend her son, she was. Just because a handsome man smiled at her? She wasn't some starry-eyed innocent to be flustered by a pretty grin, or a set of remarkably green eyes….

She realized that she was getting distracted by his features again, and scowled. Planting her hands firmly on that hard chest, she pushed herself off of him.

He sat up as well, bringing Jacob with him. She reached for her son, more for a way to occupy her hands and mind, rather than because the boy needed her. She could tell by his happy smile that he was fine. He took another bite of the jerky he held and chewed intently.

The stranger followed her gaze to the little boy sitting on her lap now. "Hope it was okay to give him that? He said he was hungry, and that was all I had on hand."

Tess didn't let herself look at the man, for fear that she would be distracted again. "It's fine, thank you. Normally I'd cut it up for him, but he seems okay. He's hungry enough that he'd eat vegetables right now, I'd think."

The man chuckled. "Yeah, that's pretty hungry." She sneaked a peek at him, and caught her breath at his smile. Goodness, he really was handsome, wasn't he? "You mind me asking, ma'am, *why* he's so hungry?"

"We ate the last of our provisions during the night. I was hoping to reach Fort Laramie today, but I couldn't make him understand that the food was gone." She sighed. "He thought I wasn't letting him eat just to be mean." Why was she blathering on, sharing

so much with this man, when she should be keeping her own council? The lack of sleep must mean she wasn't thinking clearly.

He stared at her for a long moment, and then he shrugged. "Well, I've got some tinned beans we can cook up, if you're not in a hurry, and then I'll take you to Fort Laramie. Heading that way myself, to discuss beef contracts."

She was a little disturbed at the way her heart leapt at his words. She told herself her reaction was just because he was offering her a faster way to safety… not because she'd have to spend hours on a horse with such a handsome man. But could she trust him? She chewed on the inside of her lip while she tried to decide. Take him up on his offer, and assume that he was more scrupulous than her most recent companions? Or send him on his way, and continue their journey alone? He looked honorable enough, but her experience with Willis proved that she was no longer the judge of character she thought.

Then Jacob made her decision for her. "Mo' food, peese." It was his favorite sentence, and might explain why he was so heavy. They just couldn't afford to turn down the stranger's offer. Her son needed food, and she was no longer sure that she could walk to Fort Laramie.

So she sighed wearily. "Thank you. Jacob and I accept your offer, Mister…?"

That smile again, with those slightly crooked teeth against that bronze skin. "Cam MacLeod, ma'am. I own a spread south of here."

She held out her hand, and said "Tess Kitchens, Mr. MacLeod." He took her hand, and she had to suppress a shiver at the odd warmth that spread up her arm at his touch. "My son and I need to get to the safety of the fort rather urgently."

She immediately regretted her choice of words, and sure enough, he latched on to the one she'd hoped he'd missed. "Safety? Are you running from something?" He stood up now, to look around. Not being able to think with him looming above her, Tess scrambled to her feet as well. She felt her muscles groan in protest at the thought of carrying Jacob for another day. She let him slip down to stand beside her, and only then turned her attention to Mr. MacLeod.

Heavens, he was big, wasn't he? It probably wouldn't have mattered to a normal-sized woman, but Tess had always been tiny. She'd taken after her father's family in that regard. They were standing close enough together that she had to tilt her head back to see his face, with his gaze now centered on the horizon to the west. He had a strong jaw, but she could see the lines around his mouth that meant he smiled often. That had to be a good sign, right? And then he glanced down at her, and she felt like she couldn't move. He had the loveliest eyes; green with flecks of gold that matched his hair. And he

made her feel so warm! Goodness, she hadn't felt this way since… well, *ever*. Not even Joshua had made her so addlepated.

Tess pushed that thought aside, and realized Mr. MacLeod was still waiting on an answer. Brevity was the best way to handle this situation. "I was with several cowboys who decided that I was fair game. I opted to try my luck reaching the safety of the fort, rather than staying with the drive."

His face clouded, and she was suddenly glad that she'd done nothing to anger him. Despite his laugh-lines, he could be a dangerous man after all. "What were you doing with a bunch of cowboys? Where's the boy's father?"

She sighed wearily. "No offense meant, Mr. MacLeod, but that's not really your concern."

A long moment passed before he shrugged and grinned slightly, and turned to his horse's saddlebags. Tess was afraid he was going to leave them after all, but he returned with a pot and two cans. She settled Jacob on her lap and the two of them watched hungrily as their savior started a small fire and heated up some beans. They weren't even fully hot when she let Jacob taste them, and she wasn't much more patient. They might have been tepid canned beans, but Tess didn't think she'd ever tasted anything better.

Afterwards, she settled back with a satisfied sigh, and realized that Mr. MacLeod had eaten much less than his share. Guilt soaked through her. "I'm sorry for my earlier sharpness, Mr. MacLeod. Jacob and I owe you greatly."

He looked away and shrugged. Was he… was he flushing? Oh good Heavens, she wished she hadn't seen that; it made him look endearing. "Nothing to worry about. Everyone's got a right to be private. And call me Cam."

"Well, thank you, Cam. I don't know what we would have done —" she was interrupted by a huge yawn, and then apologized. He only chuckled, and started to pack the cooking utensils and her things behind his saddle. When he came to her .32, he raised a brow in her direction, but tucked it into the sack with her other things. He made sure they'd all—including his horse—had enough water, and were ready to leave. Settling a wide-brimmed hat on his head, he scooped up Jacob, settling the boy on the horse. Tess smiled to hear her son's giggles. He'd always been a happy little baby, but she was his only playmate. It was nice to see him laughing with someone else for a change.

Cam swung up into the saddle, and Tess didn't have a chance to appreciate his fluid grace, because she was busy watching her son's reaction. The boy squealed gleefully, and she was moving towards them before she realized she'd stood up.

Then she was standing at the horse's flank, marveling at how far above her Cam sat. One large forearm extended towards her, and she took his hand without thinking. That same shiver passed through her again at his touch. "Put your foot on my boot." She did, and he pulled her up effortlessly.

Before she could draw in a full breath, she was settled against his hard thighs—goodness, did she have to notice that?—with Jacob and his blankie on her lap. One strong arm cradled her back as she sat across his lap, while the other held the reins and kept Jacob from pitching off the horse. She appreciated his concern, and was impressed by how easily he handled the little boy.

They headed northeast, and it only took a few minutes for Tess to realize that this wasn't going to work. She wasn't much of a horsewoman, and the constant bouncing was playing hell on her backside. Each step of the horse caused her bottom to slam into Cam's thighs, until it was all she could do to bite off her moans.

She must not have been suffering in quite the silence she'd imagined, though. After a half-hour of torture, Cam cleared his throat. "You got any objection to riding astride?"

"Why?" Did she sound desperate? Perhaps.

"If you shift your leg over the horn, and leaned back a bit, I'm thinking all three of us would be more comfortable."

Tess debated for all of a heartbeat before deciding to throw propriety to the wind. After the last three days, she just couldn't handle another six hours of this hell. She lifted a drowsy Jacob against her chest, and with a little help from Cam, repositioned herself astride the horse. Astride him. Oh, why did she have to think that? But it was true; she was straddling his thighs as well as the saddle.

And that might have mattered, had she not been through the last few days. As it was, she tried her hardest to support her now-sleeping son and keep her back ramrod-straight. But Cam's strength was alluring, and his heat was surprisingly comforting in the Wyoming afternoon, and soon she found herself relaxing against him.

Her last thought before she surrendered to a blissfully peaceful sleep was that she'd never felt so safe.



Cam didn't think he'd ever felt anything as right as the sleeping woman in his arms. It was an entirely new experience for him, and one he enjoyed. Of course, that first part of the ride, with her sweet little rear end bouncing against his lap, had been torturous. But after she straddled him—now why'd he have to go and think *that*?—and

relaxed a bit, he was able to tamp down on his arousal. He knew that he didn't have a lot of experience with women, but he never would have guessed how nice it was to just hold one while she slept.

Of course, it might be just *this* woman. Mrs. Tess Kitchens was…well, she was beautiful, yeah, but didn't have Serena's pristine loveliness. No, she was more earthy, more alluring. More sensual. And considering that she'd been through hell for the last three days, and looked plumb worn out, he thought it was amazing he could think of her as anything besides 'exhausted'. But from the moment he saw her on that bank, with Jacob sitting beside her bawling his eyes out, he was hooked. He didn't know anything about her—didn't even know if there was a Mr. Kitchens, although he figured there *had* to be—but he wanted to learn everything. She pricked his curiosity like no other woman had, and he figured he could spend hours just drinking in her exotic beauty.

Exotic, that was it. He didn't know her, but knew that she was different from every other woman he'd met. Even Molly Barker, Rose's mother, would have thought twice before bundling up her kids and walking—*walking*!—across the empty Wyoming prairie. But Tess had done just that. She had a strength that was hidden by her tiny stature, and he admired that. She was the same small size as Serena, but while Cam had always thought of his partner's wife as being delicate and porcelain, Tess's solemn courage was reassuring. Like she was the kind of person you could depend on. She wasn't the type to be taken care of; she was going to figure out what needed doing, and go do it. He couldn't help but be impressed by that.

And since he was being honest with himself, he admitted that her beauty intrigued him too. Under a green silk scarf, her hair was straight and black and pulled into a knot at the base of her neck, but he could tell it would be silky when she let it all down. Her eyes were dark, but almost almond-shaped, and her skin was creamy, tinged pink by the sun across her forehead, cheeks and nose. In fact, she reminded him a bit of his friend Nate Barker; even though Nate was only a quarter Indian, he had enough of his grandmother's coloring to make his life difficult when he tried to fit into Cheyenne society.

But Tess wasn't Indian. There was something else there, something else Cam wanted to know about. Ah, who was he fooling? He wanted to know everything about her. Exotic was a good word for her; she'd gotten into his senses like a spice he couldn't place, and now he wanted to have more and more until he was sated.

That ride was surprisingly comfortable, despite the addition of two extra bodies on his horse. The kid was hardly any trouble at all, and Cam discovered that he liked the trust the little guy showed in him, by tucking his small body up against Cam's shoulder. Jacob—

that's what Tess had called him—had curls a much lighter shade than her hair, and big dark blue eyes. He'd giggled a lot at Cam, but the man figured it was because he'd fed the little tyke. Food would endear him to any starving kid. But still, it was nice, the way Jacob pressed his cheek against Cam's upper arm before he fell asleep. And watching those long lashes lay against the boy's smooth skin, Cam didn't even mind the little bit Jacob drooled on him. If he had been able, Cam would have wiped it up with the blanket the boy was carrying; but his arms were full with Jacob's mother.

And truthfully, Cam couldn't have been happier. It was well past supper by the time he reached the fort, and only then did his charges awaken. He could tell she was embarrassed by the peaceful way she'd slept in his arms, although he didn't mind it one bit. A blush climbed up those smooth cheeks, and she didn't look at him when she thanked him. Before he knew it, she and her son were being whisked away by the commandant's wife, and he was on his way to the barracks to see about some grub.

It wasn't until much later, lying on his bedroll with his hands stacked behind his head, that he realized that he hadn't gotten the chance to say goodbye to Tess Kitchens. He thought it should have mattered more to him, and wondered why it didn't. It took a few minutes of examining his reaction before he realized that he wasn't bothered by it because he knew it wasn't a goodbye. He *was* going to see her again, to find out all about her, to answer his questions.

Whether she knew it or not.

CHAPTER THREE



It took two days before Tess was feeling human again. She slept straight through that first night; in fact, she barely woke up to get off of Mr. MacLeod's horse and into a guest room provided by the kind Mrs. Gibbon. All she knew was that someone had told her Jacob would be fed and cared for, and she'd fallen asleep again. The next morning she woke to her frantic son trying to get into bed with her, and they snuggled until her hunger drove her from the room. But she was pushed back into bed by an overbearing housekeeper, who fed her until Tess thought she'd burst. And then she slept again.

On the second day, Tess was feeling right as rain, but Mrs. Gibbon and her staff insisted she remain in bed after her 'ordeal'. "To think!" the matron had *harrumphed*, "walking close to forty miles carrying that big boy! In this heat and with limited supplies!"

Tess smiled slightly as the woman tucked her into bed again, amused at the fuss. She'd told her story to her host and hostess after she had woken that first morning, and saw their horror. But while the experience had been one of the hardest things she'd done, she still thought that it had been a wise choice. After all, she had saved herself and her son from violence, and had made it to her intended destination. Of course, she might *not* have made it had it not been for her mysterious rescuer, but she wasn't going to let that dull her attitude of no regrets.

But Cam MacLeod *was* a regret. She wished she had thanked him again. She wished she had apologized for sleeping on him for so long, and making him mind Jacob. She wished she hadn't been rude to him and had taken the time to ask him about himself. She wished she hadn't been so attracted to a man who'd swooped out of nowhere to rescue her, and who disappeared so suddenly from her life.

It would have been nice to say goodbye.

On the third morning after her arrival, Tess felt like her old self, and chaffed at the inactivity. So she donned borrowed clothes—hers were still missing—and snuck out of her sick bed. She found the nursery, where Jacob had been staying with the youngest Gibbon children, and spent an enjoyable few hours with her son and one-year-

old Andrew and three-year-old Laura. The housekeeper was surprised to see her, and Mrs. Gibbon nearly had a fit to find Tess lying on the floor with the children climbing around her. But Tess calmly explained that she was fully recovered, and ready to be out of bed. Mrs. Gibbon threw her hands up with a huff, smiled, and bustled out again.

Tess found out why at luncheon, when she dined with the family. Since she was recovered enough to "roll around on the floor", her hostess had decided that she was well enough for a social function. A groan threatened to slip free, but Tess managed to bite down on it. She'd had little use for social dinners in her life, and less experience. But she could tell that in a fort like this one—where society was limited to the men stationed there and their families—that the hierarchy was well-defined. Mrs. Gibbon proclaimed that tonight's dinner would be hosted by Captain and Mrs. Jonathan Newell, her husband's adjutant. Tess recognized the name as the lady who'd lent the dress she was wearing, as everything Mrs. Gibbon owned would be huge on her. So she smiled tightly and thanked her hostess. And if she was lying just a bit when she said she was looking forward to the dinner—to being put on display in front of the commandant's staff and their wives, to having to give her story again—well, that was just being polite.

She didn't feel any differently by that evening, but she had to admit that she looked better than she had a few days ago. The borrowed gown was a lovely shade of green; tight in the front—lower than she would have chosen for herself too—and full in the back. There was a small bustle that was popular these days, but which Tess had never had the money for. She felt quite elegant.

Mrs. Gibbon called her to the nursery to put Jacob to bed, and she cuddled with him through their bedtime routine. First a story, and then songs. She loved the way his little cheeks crunched up as she stroked his forehead, and the way he tried to nuzzle into her chest. This was her own special time with her own special boy, when none of the outside world could intrude.

Tonight, though, Jacob had something on his mind. Before she could start a second song, he grabbed her hand. "Man, mama?"

"What man, honey?"

"Horsey man?"

"Mr. MacLeod? The man who gave us food and carried us on his horse?"

"Where, mama?"

She kissed his forehead, and ran her fingers through his curls, Joshua's legacy. "I don't know, honey. He saved us, though, so we have to remember to pray for him."

Jacob frowned. “Bye-bye man?”

“Yes, he went bye-bye. He said he had to meet with Colonel Gibbon about beef—moo-cows, you know—so he’s probably long gone.”

“Good man.”

“Yes honey.” Tess swallowed past a sudden lump in her throat. What was it about Cam MacLeod that had affected her so? “He was a good man.”

Her son fell asleep a few minutes later, but the normalcy of the routine was soured by her melancholy. She kissed his little forehead, and checked on the other two, before closing the door. Straightening her back and taking a deep breath, she headed downstairs to find Colonel and Mrs. Gibbon waiting.

Tess smiled at the older woman in appreciation. “Thank you for your patience.”

“Of course! I know how important bedtime routines are, for both child and mother,” She leveled a mock glare at her husband, “even if John doesn’t.”

The colonel harrumphed, but wisely said nothing as he held the door for his wife and young guest. The walk across the parade ground was short, and they nodded greeting to several groups of young officers strolling about. Tess could feel their gazes, and straightened her shoulders. She’d known that she’d be on display, and had tried to prepare herself for it. But there was a difference between understanding it and experiencing it. She steeled herself to be on her best behavior.

To her surprise, when they arrived at the Newell home, there was no one else there. Confusion must have shown on her face, because Charlotte Newell—a tiny little fluff of a woman who looked like she lived and breathed social functions—smiled. “Frances,” she nodded towards Mrs. Gibbon, “thought it would be best to keep tonight’s dinner small. We’re waiting on one more guest.”

Tess’s relief was so great that she actually grabbed Mrs. Gibbon’s hand. Her breathy “thank you” must have conveyed more emotion than she’d intended, because Colonel Gibbon chuckled, and Mrs. Gibbon patted her hand and smiled understandingly.

They adjourned to a small parlor where they made small talk. Apparently the Newells had heard of her ordeal. Captain Newell—a tall, gangly scarecrow of a man who tended to lean towards her when he spoke—was particularly interested in the details. He loomed over her and decried the state of lawlessness in the territories. “Have you considered pressing charges, my dear? You said that these men were headed to Cheyenne. The city isn’t so big that we couldn’t find them and punish them for their actions.”

Tess bit her lip. “Truthfully, sir, I would rather put it all behind me. I left their company because of something I feared, not because of action on their part. It was possible that it was the whiskey speaking for them, and that they’d never have acted. I didn’t want to take that chance, so we parted ways.” She could tell the Captain didn’t approve, and wanted to punish *some*one. “My real regret is losing my trunk. All of my clothes, and Jacob’s things, and a few mementos from my parents.” She sighed. “It was hard to part with that, but I felt lucky that we were both alive and healthy.”

“Indeed, indeed.” Colonel’s boom interrupted whatever retort the Captain was going to offer. “We can all thank the Lord that you and your son were spared. And unless I’m mistaken, here’s the man we have to thank.” The older man turned towards the sound of the parlor door opening, and Tess felt her heart drop into her stomach.

There, handing over his hat to a waiting servant was none other than Cam MacLeod. She wondered if she’d somehow conjured him, to have him appear so soon after her conversation with Jacob. So soon after wishing she’d have a chance to say good-bye.

Whereas the other men were dressed primly in their starchy uniforms, Cam wore only a fresh cotton shirt tucked into neat blue jeans. He didn’t even have a tie, and Tess could see the faint shadow at the base of his throat. Her gaze flew back to his, mortified to have been caught staring at him, and was captivated once more by that uneven grin of his. Good Heavens, but he was handsome, wasn’t he? She felt her pulse in her temple, and swallowed past a suddenly dry throat.

The Colonel was still talking, but she didn’t know what he’d said, and only hoped that she hadn’t been asked any questions. She was dimly aware of the others responding, of moving around her, but she couldn’t seem to tear her eyes away from those bright green ones across the room. Tess wondered if he could hear her heartbeat, loud in her own ears.

And then he was walking towards her.



The look of pure joy that flashed across Tess Kitchens’ face when she first saw him pierced Cam right through the heart. It was something that he hoped he’d never forget; the way her dark eyes lit up and her lips parted. She gave him a thorough once-over, and he felt himself getting tight under the belt at the realization. Then a blush colored those creamy cheeks even pinker, and he saw her fists clench nervously. He couldn’t help his smile then, knowing that she was

happy to see him again.

Colonel Gibbon was introducing him to the others, but he couldn't seem to tear his eyes away from those dark ones across the room. He heard some laughter, and then the Captain was inviting them to the dining room. "Why don't you escort Mrs. Kitchens?" Cam was happy to.

He crossed the room, and watched her stand to meet him. Not that it did any good; she still only came up to his chest. Then he was standing before her, her head tipped back to stare boldly into his face, and he liked the way she didn't look away. For such a tiny little thing, she didn't have any of Serena's primness or reticence. No, Mrs. Tess Kitchens was as determined as he was, and the thought made his lips quirk.

He kept his voice low, between just the two of them. "In the absence of Mr. Kitchens, can I escort you to dinner, Tess?"

The flush crept further up her cheeks. "My husband died two years ago, Mr. MacLeod."

He tried to feel sorry for her loss, but just couldn't. His smile spread. "Then I hope you'll take me instead." Until he said it, he hadn't realized the implications, but her eyes widened. He turned slightly and offered her his arm. She hesitated a moment, and then placed her fingers lightly on it. Did they feel warm through his shirt, or was that just his imagination? He couldn't seem to make himself move.

"I'd be happy to, Mr. MacLeod." He wondered if she was talking about accepting his escort, or him. At that moment, Cam himself wasn't sure what he'd meant. All he knew was that this woman aroused him like no other, and that she wasn't married. That meant that she was available, and he planned to take advantage of the fact that she obviously was affected by his touch.

"Please, Tessa," He bent his head towards her and allowed his father's gentle burr to enter his voice with the nickname, "Call me Cam."

Was it his imagination, or did she shiver? His grin turned pleased and he escorted her through the door to the dining room. He held out her chair for her, acknowledged her murmured "thank you", and took his seat across from her.

Truthfully, the dinner was only saved from being boring by her presence. Cam normally wouldn't have been caught dead at such a highfalutin social function, preferring the easy camaraderie of saloons when he went to town at all. But after his discussion with the Colonel —during which the commandant agreed to take another delivery of ninety head of Open Skye cattle next month—the conversation turned to his recent adventure. When Colonel Gibbon mentioned that his wife

was arranging a small dinner when their guest recovered, Cam did everything he could to finagle an invitation. The older man had smiled through his trim beard, and nodded kindly. “If you can stand Newell’s company, you’re welcome to join us!” The twinkle in his eye told Cam that the Colonel understood his desire to see Tess again.

Now, seated across from her, he tried not to let his confusion at the multiple forks and too many wine glasses show. Instead, he watched her. She seemed out of her element as well, but he admired the grace and elegance with which she negotiated the dinner. He thought that she had the loveliest voice—surprisingly throaty in someone so small—and probably neglected a delicious dinner to just stare at and listen to her. She seemed flustered by the attention, and he hoped it was a good sign.

Because Cam wanted her like he’d wanted no other woman before. What he’d felt for Serena was—quite literally—a pale comparison to the way Tess made his blood boil with just a touch. And hell, he hadn’t even kissed the woman!

“So, Mrs. Kitchens,” Colonel Gibbon was drawing Tess into the conversation that Cam had been ignoring for the better part of the meal. “You were headed to Cheyenne with that cattle drive, correct? Do you still need an escort down that way? Is there anyone expecting you we should have notified of your sojourn here?”

She shook her head slightly, and took a small sip of wine before speaking. “No one, Colonel. My son and I have been living in Montana Territory, but we were trying to get to the railway in Cheyenne—or one of the nearby depots—to head west again.”

“To California?”

“Yes, sir. I grew up in San Francisco.”

“Visiting family?” Mrs. Newell effortlessly joined the conversation.

“No.” Tess looked down at her plate. “Giving up.”

“Oh dear.” Mrs. Newell patted her arm. “I can’t imagine how hard life must be for a young mother in someplace as lawless as Montana. I completely understand the desire to get back to civilization.”

“It’s not…” Tess took a deep breath. “The land is beautiful up there, but yes, very rough. It was my late husband’s dream to open a general store in Bozeman, to become part of the lumber industry. We sold my family’s shop and went north, and it was lovely. But hard. And even harder when he passed away. Then I had Jacob and realized I couldn’t handle the store myself, so I sold half the stock and moved to Coulson. But it was so…” she took a deep breath, as if tamping down bad memories, “…so lawless there. We had to move again to Miles City. A few months back I realized I wasn’t going to be able to

make it alone there either, so I decided to go back to San Francisco, where at least I knew people."

Mrs. Gibbon *tsked*. "Such a shame! No family there either, so your supports will be just as limited."

Cam smiled slightly at the way Tess's back straightened. She wasn't defeated, not by a long shot. "Well, what choice do I have, really? There are no churches or schools in Coulson, and whiskey ruled Miles City. In San Francisco, at least there will be people I can learn to trust." He thought that last part was telling.

"No, dear, my point is that this life is hard when we're all alone. The good Lord put us on this earth to find a partner, and not in business. We all need someone else to rely on occasionally."

"I have Jacob."

"And he relies on you, but you can't rely on him. You need someone to share your burdens. So you don't have to 'make it alone', as you said."

The Colonel interrupted. "She's saying you need to get married, my dear. Re-married, as it were. So you don't have to call it quits and head back to California. You'd better watch yourself; my Frances is an accomplished matchmaker."

And in that moment, Cam knew what he wanted. He wanted a wife, and she fired his blood like no woman he'd ever met. He barely knew her, but could tell that they'd do well together. She was a widow, and he was going to marry her.

Seems she had different thoughts though. "You think that marrying would solve all of my problems?" He even liked the way she managed to lace sarcasm through her polite tone.

"Why not?" Mrs. Newell patted her arm again, and Cam could see Tess's frustration at the way they were all ganging up on her. "Marriage would give you a home, and Jacob a father. You'd have a place to belong and wouldn't have to worry about supporting yourself."

"I've been doing fine for two years now, and I've turned down dozens of proposals."

"Of course you did, my dear. You were in the middle of the wilds, and those men were likely true barbarians. But you just admitted that you're no longer able to stand on your own feet, so I would say that times have changed." Mrs. Newell's gaze softened. "Just think about it. There's nothing waiting for you in California, but here you could marry an officer or a rancher—" Cam appreciated the subtle flicker of her eyes in his direction, but wasn't sure if Tess noticed, "and stop having to toil alone."

He saw the hesitation on Tess's face, the doubt in her eyes, and could have cheered. Instead, he hid his smile behind another sip of

wine.

"Why are you so interested in my future?" It was a bold question, and both other woman laughed.

"Because, my dear, I have a fort full of handsome, courageous, honorable and *unmarried* officers!" Mrs. Gibbon's laugh was full-bodied, and even her husband chuckled. "We'd *love* to have you stay here!"

"We like you." Mrs. Newell's comment made Tess flush again, but Cam wasn't about to let her stay here at Fort Laramie.

"If you made it to Cheyenne, ma'am, things wouldn't be much better." He liked the way her gaze snapped back to his. Was she eager for him? He wanted to think so. "The city might be the hub of culture in these parts, but there's still not so many beautiful woman that you wouldn't have a dozen propositions before you got to the station."

"You think I'm beautiful?" It was a whisper, and Cam thought it might have slipped out accidentally. It certainly wasn't something someone asked in proper company. But he appreciated the candor, and returned the favor.

"You're fast becoming the most beautiful woman I ever laid eyes on."

Her eyes went wide, and he heard gasps from the other two women, and a chuckle from the Colonel. "You wouldn't happen to be looking for a wife now, would you, Mr. MacLeod?"

"Yes sir, I am." He didn't look at the older man, but held her gaze. "I've been looking for a while. And even though I just met Mrs. Kitchens, I think we'd do fine together."

"And her son?"

Tess's brows drew in and she shook her head once, slightly, as if to clear it. But he didn't look away, and didn't let her either. "Jacob's a fine boy, and I'd be proud to raise him as my own." And he meant it. Ash and Nate had taught him that family wasn't just about blood; it was about love and trust. He could offer that to Jacob, and hope that the boy came to think of him as a father. "Maybe someday he'll call me 'Daddy'."

Were those tears gathering in her eyes? Tess blinked and looked away, and he wanted to gather her in his arms. He'd forgotten there was anyone else sharing this moment until Mrs. Gibbon spoke up. "I should have known that if you came to this dinner, we wouldn't get to keep her, Mr. MacLeod." Her sigh didn't sound quite as resigned as she was trying to appear, and there was a twinkle in the older woman's eye. "Tess, dear, Mr. MacLeod is a good man, with prospects as good as any of my husband's officers. I should tell you that he'd make a fine husband to any woman interesting enough to keep his attention. You should seriously consider his suit."

Surprised, Cam smiled his thanks to the Colonel's wife. He'd only met her twice before, and hadn't realized he'd made such an impression. Switching his gaze to Tess's, he prayed that she wasn't going to dismiss him outright.

The moment of intensity was broken by a chuckle from Colonel Gibbon. "Well, son, I guess you ought to make it official."

Cam took a deep breath. "Marry me, Tessa?"

"I…" It was good that she wasn't turning him down, and he wasn't about to lose the opportunity.

"Walk with me, then. Let me convince you."

She was going to say no, he could tell. She was going to let propriety and tradition, and the idea that he should court her first, sway her. But then Captain Newell—an unlikely ally—added his voice to the not-so-private conversation. "It seems like the least you could do, Mrs. Kitchens. Hear out his suit."

And to Cam's surprise, she nodded and stood. "If you'll excuse us then?"

He thought he might have nodded to his host and hostess, but he couldn't be sure. He pushed back his chair and followed her out the door. As he passed the Colonel's place, he heard the older man murmur "Good luck, son."

He hoped he wouldn't need it.

CHAPTER FOUR



She couldn't believe that she was even considering this. Tess stopped on the Newells' front porch and rubbed sweaty palms against her thighs. When she realized she'd likely ruin the silk that way, she bunched her hands into fists instead. The nails digging into her palms helped to keep her centered; to remember what was important in life. She and Jacob would find *some* way to survive, in Cheyenne or San Francisco or one of the cities in between. She should have turned Mr. MacLeod down immediately. She shouldn't have listened to Mrs. Gibbon's ideas. But sitting there across from the sexiest man she'd ever seen, the reasoning seemed so valid. And when that man proposed *marriage* to her? Well, she was certain she'd felt her heart stop, and walking with him had seemed like a fine idea.

His booted steps were heavy across the porch, but she wasn't surprised; the man was huge. Her heart beat in tempo, until she knew he was standing right behind her. But instead of looming over her—not that she'd ever felt loomed over during their interactions—he moved in front of her and stepped down two steps. Now they stood almost eye-to-eye, and she wasn't sure that was such a good thing. Was she going to be able to think clearly with him so close? With those gorgeous green eyes *right there*?

"I don't know a lot of women, Tessa, but those I *do* know want to get married. Why don't you? Or is it just me you object being married to?"

Ha. If only he had any idea what had gone through her head at his proposition. Images of waking up beside this man every day, of working to make his house a home, of *sleeping* beside him…. She was sure she'd blushed brightly. But she didn't know him, and didn't need a husband.

"I've been married once already, Mr. MacL—"

"Cam."

She nodded. "Cam. I've been married once, and while it wasn't unpleasant, I see no need to repeat the experience. Jacob and I do well enough on our own. If not running a store, I'll find some work to do. I'm strong and able, even if I don't look like much." His lips quirked

into a grin, and those eyes swept over her once.

"You look fine tonight, Tessa. I'm sorry I didn't say so earlier."

Well *that* completely sidetracked her. "I… thank you." Self-consciously, she smoothed the front of the dress. "Mrs. Newell loaned it to me—"

"I'm not talking about the dress, Tessa."

"Oh." She felt her brows draw in, what her mother always told her was an unattractive reaction to surprise. But it was hard not to be suspicious when a man as gorgeous as Cam MacLeod called her beautiful. She wasn't beautiful; she was too dark, too foreign to be beautiful. She was too feisty and too determined to be beautiful. Too *different* to be beautiful. Her father's people and her mother's people each thought she was odd-looking, and the only man who'd ever been willing to take her had been her life-long friend Joshua. Hearing Cam call her 'fine-looking' was disconcerting enough to change the topic.

"Why do you call me Tessa?"

He shrugged, and Heavens, when those shoulders shrugged she could see ripples all the way along his arms. "My family's Scots, and I had an aunt Teresa. Everyone called her Tessa. If it bothers you…?"

"No." She was quick to reassure him, although she wasn't sure why. "I was just wondering."

The silence should have been awkward, but it wasn't. It felt comfortable, right, to stand here in the darkness with this man.

"Tell me about your family." Her demand earned her another smile.

"Gladly." He turned towards the parade ground, and offered her his arm again. As before, she placed her hand lightly on his forearm, and could feel the heat of him through the cotton. It sent shivers through her, and she wondered about her reaction. He started them on a leisurely stroll through the patches of light formed by the lampposts.

"I have three older sisters. They're all married and happily living back in Glengarry County, Ontario. That's where all the Highlanders went when they were pushed off their land by the English in the last clearances. My father's family was one of the last to go. He left the Isle of Skye when he was five, but he still talks about how beautiful it was." He could have led her through fire and she wouldn't have noticed. Her attention was centered fully on the man next to her, and the very faint burr in his voice that she hadn't noticed before. "After our mother died, I realized I didn't want to stay in Glengarry, to do the same thing my sisters and cousins all did. I wanted freedom. I wanted to own my own land and make it a success. I came out here and bought as much cattle as I could afford. I've been building my ranch ever since. I named it the Open Skye, and after I grew it

enough, I invited my father out here." He chuckled. "I was more than a little surprised when he took me up on the offer, but he's been living out here with me for a few years now."

They'd made almost a full circuit of the ground, and Cam found a bench in front of an officer's garden. He pulled her down beside him, and she followed obediently. Her knees felt like pudding around him anyway. Was it so wrong to want to sit with him, to feel his heat, for a moment?

She listened to him tell her about his ranch, and could hear the pride in his voice when he spoke about expanding. Apparently he thought that free-ranging cattle were a thing of the past, and had made an effort to buy up as much land as possible, so that no one could fence him off. There was something about a deal made the year before to gain ownership of his neighbor's ranch, but not really. The man who married the ranch owner had lent him the money to buy, and so Cam had been selling off his cattle at a higher rate than normal to pay off the loan. He'd rather own the land free and clear, and *then* build his herd back up. That explained his visit to the fort and his need to sell more cattle.

Listening to the conviction in his voice was intoxicating. She could almost see the ranch, and could appreciate his passion. She had so many questions about his decisions and plans, but for now she was content to just sit quietly. She was learning so much about ranching, and about him. He was a good man; a hard worker with a zeal for life. She appreciated that he knew his talents and his limits, and had figured out how to apply them to get what he wanted out of life. And she even liked that he'd made a home for his father way out here in Wyoming.

Yes, the more Cam MacLeod talked, the more smitten she became. Which was silly, because she wasn't some bubble-headed debutante. She was a widowed mother who'd worked hard her entire life, and was entirely too jaded to go all wobbly just because an unbelievably handsome man smiled at her.

But the problem was that he *was* smiling at her, and she *was* going all wobbly. And he'd asked her to marry him. And listening to the pride and happiness in his voice as he spoke about his home, she wasn't so sure that it was a bad idea. Maybe Mrs. Gibbon and Mrs. Newell *were* right; maybe marrying would solve her problems. She was honest enough with herself to admit that she really liked the idea of having someone to share life's burdens with. But she hadn't lied earlier; she'd gotten dozens of proposals—marriage and other, less savory ones—since being widowed in such a ragged land as Montana. And she hadn't considered any of them. What was it about today that made her agree to hear Cam's suit? Was it her recent misadventure?

Or the fact that he'd rescued her and deserved to be heard? Or because he stirred her blood the way no man had ever done?

"Once we moved over to the old Double-S, we had plenty of space to spread out. Too much, in fact. There's just me and Da in the house, and it was built for a family." Suddenly he looked down at his hands, and she wondered if he was nervous. "I know that's what I'm missing in life; what I want. I want a wife who'll stand beside me and a bunch of kids running around my land. I want to feel that… belonging."

"Jacob's not your son." Earlier he'd said that he would raise Jacob as his own, but that was too unusual not to call him on. She'd never heard that from any of the men who'd propositioned her before.

He shifted towards her on the bench and took one of her hands. "I would never ask you to give up your memories of your first husband. And if you think it's best that Jacob know I'm just his step-father, then that's your decision. But I think it's important that a kid have two parents he knows he can count on, and I can be that for him." He was talking about acceptance, what he was looking for in a family.

She slowly nodded. "Joshua died before Jacob was born, so he has nothing to tie him to his father. I never considered re-marrying, so it wasn't an issue. But I suppose that I'd rather Jacob know a father."

His thumb started tracing circles across the back of her hand. It felt delicious. "Consider it now, Tessa. Consider marrying me."

She swallowed past a lump in her throat. "Why? Why would a handsome man, a man with a home and a big spread and money, want to marry someone like me? You could have your pick of women. You don't need a penniless half-breed wife who comes with a kid."

It was too dark to read the surprise on his face, but she felt him squeeze her hand, and heard him clear his throat. "I'm not desirable, Tessa. Men like me—men who've had to work hard our whole lives to get where we are—are a dime a dozen out here. But you…" Her stomach lurched and her heart jumped into her throat when he ran the back of one finger down her cheek. "You're the most desirable woman I've ever seen. I want you. I want to make a life with you. I want to be Jacob's father."

"You just met me!" she all but wailed, still unnerved by his touch.

Oh God, that grin, with the crooked teeth could make her melt. "Yeah, but a man's got to act fast out here, or he'll miss his opportunity. Marry me, Tessa."

No. *Absolutely not.* But then again…

She'd be a fool to consider marrying a man she just met. But here she was considering it, and if that made her a fool, then so be it.

Because she was doing more than considering it. She was seriously contemplating marrying a man she'd just met, because of the way he made her stomach flip and her nerves sing and warmth spread through her.

Her hesitation must have shown. "I'll make you a deal." She thought she nodded, and he continued. "Let me kiss you. After, if you say no, you don't want to marry me, I won't ask you again."

It was a deliciously scary proposition. She could say no, and walk away, and never know what it was like to be kissed by him. She could accept the Colonel's offer of an escort to Cheyenne and be on a train heading west in less than a week. She could go back home to San Francisco and hope that someone from the old neighborhood remembered her and could give her a job. She could spend the rest of her life sleeping alone, never having anyone else to rely on, to trust. Never having anyone to share in the joys and struggles of parenthood.

Or she could kiss him, now. Afterwards, she could still go to Cheyenne and get on with her life. But she'd know then, at least, what it was like to give free rein to the passion she'd felt creep through her veins every time Cam MacLeod touched her. She'd know what it was like to be really kissed.

So she nodded. She didn't think she *could* speak, but luckily, he understood.

She felt one large hand touch the side of her neck, as if to guide her, and then his lips were on hers. It was a surprisingly gentle, delicate kiss from someone as big as he was. She would have expected to be overwhelmed, intimidated by someone so much larger, but he was soft. For a long moment they were still, and she thought he was letting her get used to the feel of him. It was very nice, but a little bit of a letdown after the shivers of anticipation she'd been experiencing in his presence.

Then his lips began to move against hers, and her pulse skyrocketed. Oh good Heavens, *this*…! This was something she couldn't have imagined. It was *nothing* like being kissed by Joshua. It wasn't gentle, either. It was deep and hot and ignited something in her belly that crept down to the place between her legs, something she hadn't felt in a long time. His tongue stroked her lips, and she thought she might faint from the heady rush of pleasure it evoked. Unbidden, one hand rose to touch his cheek, and she felt his stubble under her fingers. She wondered if that explained the burn in her cheeks, or if that was all her body's own doing. He groaned against her mouth, and she dropped her fingers, intent on the feelings coursing through her.

Much too quickly, she thought, he pulled away. Tess was disconcerted enough that she almost went with him, to pull him back to her. That fact, more than anything, snapped her attention back to

the here-and-now, the reason behind the experiment. She forced herself to lean away from him, but couldn't help that she was panting, or stop herself from fingering her swollen lips.

Then she saw the way he was sitting, hunched like he was in pain. He ran both hands through his hair, pulling at the curls between his still-trembling fingers. He was breathing just as heavily as she was, and Tess gasped when she realized that he was as aroused by the kiss as she had been.

He turned at her gasp, and this time the faint glow from the nearest lamp caught the green in his eyes. "Well, Tessa? What do you say to my offer?"

There she sat, fingers pressed to throbbing lips, and thought about her future. One path led to familiarity; working long hours to keep Jacob fed, falling into bed exhausted each night, and only allowing herself to *truly* live in her dreams. The other path led to an exciting new adventure; marriage to an eminently desirable man, having someone to share her burdens again, and helping to make his ranch a success. Most importantly, Jacob would have an honorable man to show him how to grow up, and a stable home in which to do so.

Put like that, it really wasn't that hard of a decision after all.

"Yes. I'll marry you."

CHAPTER FIVE



He couldn't believe that had worked. But Cam was the kind of man who saw what he wanted, and went for it. After his conversation with her, and the realization that she was exactly what he was looking for in a wife, he would have done anything to convince her to marry him. That kiss had been everything he'd thought it would be, and more. He'd *never* been so affected by a kiss before; he had been so aroused it'd been painful! All he'd wanted to do was wrap his fingers through that neat bun, and trail kisses down Tess's neck. It'd taken all of his self-control to remind himself that he was sitting on a bench with a woman he'd just met.

Luckily, she said yes, and he didn't waste time. A quick kiss to seal the bargain, and he dragged her right back to the Newells' home. The ladies had sighed and giggled over Tess, and the Colonel shook Cam's hand and insisted on a wedding toast.

He would have liked to give Tess a grand wedding, but he just didn't have the money to waste—or the time. He'd already been away from the Open Skye for five days, and it'd take another two to get home. He'd spent much longer than necessary here at Laramie, waiting for Tess to recover. If he wasted another day, Da would get worried and was likely to send a few of the hands north to look for him.

Of course, he didn't just *tell* Tess his decision; he explained why he needed to get back, and appreciated when she agreed with him immediately. They decided they'd be married first thing in the morning, and then head out.

And so that's how he was currently riding beside Mrs. Cameron Alexander MacLeod. It'd given him a light feeling to hear the chaplain proclaim them husband and wife, and he was still smiling. He'd scooped up Jacob—who'd been confusedly solemn throughout the wedding—and tickled him 'til he giggled. Then he planted another one of those amazing kisses on his new wife's lips, and felt them curl under his. He hoped that she was as pleased with this marriage as he was. He hoped that it would make them both happy.

Tess wasn't exactly a competent horsewoman, but then she

wasn't inept either. She'd shown up at the chapel right after dawn wearing one of those new-fangled split riding skirts with her own blouse, and Cam's pulse had sped up at the sight of her rear end pressed against the material. She'd seen the direction of his gaze, and blushed.

"Mrs. Newell knew we'd be riding all day, so she gave me an old skirt of hers."

Cam swallowed. "That was nice of her."

So she was riding astride beside him, on a sweet little mare Cam had bought off the quartermaster that morning before the wedding. She'd cost a pretty penny, but Gibbon was willing to extend credit on the beef Cam's men would drive north to Laramie later in the month.

She'd started out carrying Jacob on her lap, but the active little boy soon proved that she couldn't handle him *and* the horse. The kid crawled all over her, and managed just about every position imaginable on that saddle. After the second time she groaned because a little knee lodged in her side, Cam trotted up beside her and snagged Jacob. He hadn't wanted to sit with a stranger, but Cam soon put him at ease by explaining all about the horse and the landscape. He was just saying whatever came to his mind, but it seemed to work, and soon Jacob was happily chattering away too. Cam and Tess took turns pointing out interesting animal tracks or trees they passed. Jacob was more interested in the "horsies" though, so Cam let him pat his sorrel as often as the kid wanted.

They talked about nothing much; his home and what she could expect, the land they were traveling through, and the people they met at the fort. Everything he heard from her made him surer that he'd made the right decision in asking her to hitch her wagon to his. She was a fair, courageous woman who didn't hesitate to do what was right, and that was a quality he could appreciate.

Lunch was a picnic Mrs. Gibbon had packed for them, calling it their "wedding feast." Cam teased Tess about it, but she just shrugged and smiled slightly. "We couldn't afford to waste time on a reception. And we didn't really know anyone there to celebrate with." He appreciated her practicality.

And now Jacob was asleep in the crook of Cam's arm, his blankie shoved under his nose like always. Cam was surprised how comfortable he felt holding the kid. It gave him that same light feeling he'd experienced when Tess had quietly said "I do". The same feeling he got from holding little Rose. But there was something else here, something right and good. Maybe it was because he had a claim to this kid now. Maybe it was because he knew Jacob depended on him, relied on Cam to keep him safe. Whatever it was, he felt downright

comfortable holding a sleeping two-year-old on the back of a horse.

He glanced over at Tess. She seemed to be holding up alright. Still, he didn't want to wear her out, and wondered when they should stop for a rest. "How long is he going to sleep?"

She quickly looked towards her son. "Maybe a while. I'll take him back if he's too heavy. Or if you need your hand back."

Hastily, he reassured her. "Nah, we're fine. I was just wondering when it would be okay to stop again. I don't want to wear you out."

The look she turned on him was funny, like she couldn't figure him out. Then she straightened in the saddle and faced forward once more. "I'll be fine. We can keep going as long as you need to."

Cam shrugged. "We'll be back at the ranch before dark tomorrow, even if we stop a little early today. I'd rather make sure we all arrive in one piece."

"Alright." That faint smile was back. "I'll admit that I wouldn't mind another stop. But after Jacob wakes up, please. I love him, but his naptime is the only peace I get these days."

He smiled at the weariness in her tone, and almost reminded her that there were two of them to take care of the kid now. Sure, Cam would likely be gone most of the days, but he'd be able to see her in the evenings, to share her worries and burdens. And his father had been staying in the house more often in the last year, so she'd have Ian's help too. Instead of mentioning all that, he just looked down at Jacob, and tucked a curl behind one little ear. "Yeah, he's a tornado alright. But he sure is cute. That smile of his, when his cheeks scrunch up into his eyes? That's a heart-breaker."

She was looking at him oddly again, so he nodded to let her know he meant it. She didn't stop. "What?"

"I just…" her brows drew in even further. "I've just never known a man who noticed things like that. Besides my father, I guess. Most men think children are their woman's problem."

Cam shrugged, careful not to disturb Jacob. "Maybe. I like kids. I want a whole passel of 'em, if you could stand more." Her eyes widened and she bit her bottom lip. He wondered if she knew how erotic that was. "Knowing that you're responsible for something so delicate, that they're relying on you to keep 'em safe and teach 'em right… that's something special." A moment of silence passed before he confessed, "I'm starting to think it's the reason we're put on this earth."

"I've thought the same thing." Her whisper was a long time in coming, long enough that Cam wondered if she would respond. "Raising Jacob has been the hardest thing I've ever done, and I'm constantly worried about him. Is he eating the right foods? Is he going

to fall in the fire? Am I being patient enough? But then I get his cuddles, his little kisses, and I think that maybe everything will be alright."

"I can tell you're a good mother, Tessa."

"Not always."

"The fact that you worry about being a good mother means you *are* one."

She didn't respond, but he saw a flush creep up her neck. It sure was a nice neck, all creamy smooth. She was wearing that same green silk scarf she'd had tied around her hair when he'd met her, only this time it was tucked around her neck and into the front of her blouse. It was almost as pretty as she was.

"You mind me asking you something?" Dark eyes flicked towards him. "Yesterday you called yourself a half-breed. And you signed the register this morning as 'Teresa Li Kitchens'."

She was silent for a long moment and then, reluctantly, as if she was confessing a dark secret, she said, "My father was Chinese."

Yeah, as soon as he'd seen her name he'd put two-and-two together. The slight 'otherness', the exotic slant of her beauty; she had some Oriental blood. Now that he looked at her, it was obvious. The slick, dark hair, the dark eyes with their slight tilt… but she wasn't entirely Chinese, no. "Not your mother, though?"

"No. Her name was Mueller, and she never officially married *Baba*. Big and blonde and pale."

Maybe that explained her creamy skin. Or maybe she got that from her father too; Cam couldn't tell. "Sounds like an interesting story." He'd met a few Chinamen working in Cheyenne after the railroad was complete, but only ever seen one Chinese lady. He'd heard that some of the men sent for their wives from back home, but he'd never heard of one marrying a German woman. But again, Cam didn't know much about them.

Tess had smiled at the mention of her parents, and he discovered that he liked looking at her from this angle. The curve of her neck, her high cheekbone, and the tip of her chin were all visible, and he felt a jolt of desire when he thought of kissing those spots. He shifted Jacob to a more comfortable position.

"My father wasn't like his brothers, or any of the other men who came to California to help lay rail. He was a fifth son, and was born with a crippled foot. So his family saw him as extraneous, useless to educate in the ways of a man. He came to California with two of his brothers, but he worked as a grocer instead of for the railway, and eventually opened his own store." She smiled again, and he smiled with her. "He was always so cheerful, so ready to play. Always singing or telling stories."

"And your mother?"

"She was already pretty jaded when she arrived in San Francisco. She once told me that she had worked hard her entire life, because she'd known no man would ever love her. She thought she was ugly. But *Baba* grew to love her, I think. They were partners. They worked well together."

"At the store?"

"Yes. I was their only child, and Mama was already old when I came along. I can remember a lady telling my mother it was selfish of her, to want a child, when it meant I'd grow up trapped between two worlds." Is that what she'd meant when she said that a man like him shouldn't want someone like her? Surely she didn't believe that the mixed blood made her less desirable? "But I wasn't really. My father didn't act Chinese, or speak it, or even do business with other Chinamen. I think he turned his back on his culture after they turned their back on him. The only thing Chinese about him was his eating habits," she laughed, "He could eat his weight in rice!"

"So you don't know much about China?"

"*Baba* told me the fairy tales of his childhood, while Mama told me about Little Red Riding Hood and Jack Frost. But otherwise, no. I don't know the history or the people or the language."

"I have a friend who's a quarter Indian. Nate looks Indian, but the blood's from his grandmother, who he never met. So he doesn't even know what tribe he's supposed to be from." Cam shrugged. "Of course, he's mostly white, but he doesn't look it. People only see the Indian."

"I know how it is. My whole life, people look at me and see something foreign-looking. It's hard to make them see me for what I can do, rather than what I look like." Cam nodded thoughtfully, but she continued. "And men were the worst. White men think I'm too strange to be pretty, and Chinamen think I'm too plain. Even my first husband, who I'd known since I was a girl, married me because we were friends. Not because he liked the way I looked." Dark eyes slid over him, before she focused on her horse's ears once more. "So when you said those things…"

She didn't believe him. He didn't know how to tell her the truth; that her *otherness* was what made her so exotic. And beautiful, to him. He was afraid that if he tried to explain, she'd bring up what she said about him being handsome. He'd always felt too big, too oafish to be anything other than a dumb cowboy. No woman had ever looked at him the way she had in the lamplight last night. But then, he'd never reacted to another woman the way he'd reacted to her, which is why he was so damned pleased to be riding beside her, on their way home.

So he said nothing, not sure what to say to make her believe him. He just smiled, and watched her eyes widen again. And then something like desire flashed between them, and she bit her lip again and looked away.

Suddenly, he was really looking forward to his wedding night.

But that evening, after cooking a simple dinner, he realized that his new wife was exhausted. She was practically asleep on her feet, but luckily Jacob had worn himself out as well, playing in the stream they were camped beside. Cam's stomach did a funny little flip as he watched her rock her son to sleep, placing gentle kisses on the boy's forehead and cheeks. He'd laid a bedroll out for her on one side of the banked fire, but hadn't put his own out. He was waiting for some sign from her, some indication that he was welcome beside her. He never got it; by the time he got back from checking on the horses, his wife was fast asleep, curled around his new stepson.

Cam just grinned slightly and placed his bedroll beside hers, figuring there was nothing she could say about it now. And once he was sure she really was asleep, he rolled over and wrapped one strong arm around them both, knowing that he could keep them safe and happy.

And for the first time in a long time, he was struck with a sense of rightness. He shifted closer to Tess, careful not to disturb her, and fell asleep with a smile on his face.



She woke up plastered on top of him. She didn't realize it, of course, and her first thought was that the ground certainly had gotten harder overnight. But then she became aware that her cheek was pillowed by a cotton shirt, her lips were pressed up against the warm skin at the base of his neck, and a thick arm wrapped around her back. She quickly scrambled off him, mortified.

Jacob, who was splayed spread-eagle as always, woke up chattering. Tess didn't really hear him; she was too busy thinking about how safe and comfortable she'd felt on top of her husband. How cherished. Those green eyes were staring up at her, not demanding, just curious. As if he was waiting to see what she would do. Her fingers rose unbidden to her lips, remembering what it felt to be kissed by him, and she stared back.

"Good morning." His whisper set his eyes twinkling, and she couldn't help but smile back. She still couldn't believe that a man like him could think she was pretty. But despite what she'd told him yesterday, he hadn't drawn away from her. She hadn't noticed any

difference in the way he'd treated her. She still felt… beautiful around him.

She finally roused herself enough to say "Good morning" back, and that was the last peaceful interlude they shared for a long time. Jacob was wild again—she thought Cam's description of a tornado was appropriate—and didn't want to spend another day trapped on a horse. They had to make more stops than yesterday for him to run around, and he was fussier each time they re-mounted. By mid-afternoon, Tess was ready for a nap herself.

Jacob was standing up, his arms thrown wide around the horse's neck, with Cam's hand holding the back of his britches. Although she lived her life in almost constant worry about her little daredevil, she was surprised how calm she was when her new husband held her son. She trusted Cam with the boy. He was unexpectedly patient with the two-year-old, willing to teach.

"Those are the ears. The horse's ears."

"Ho-sey ee-ya?"

"Horsey's eeeeeear."

"EEEEEEE-YA?"

Cam chuckled. "Close enough. That's the mane you're hanging on there. Like the horsey's hair."

"Mane hair?"

"Right. You have hair on your head," he ruffled the boys' curls, and Jacob ducked and giggled as he slid back down to his rear end, "But the horsey has hair on his neck and tail. He likes to be scratched right here. No," he gentled guided the boy's hand, "Like this. Don't hit, scratch."

"Nice ho-sey."

"Yeah, nice horsey. When we get home, I'll take you to see the other horsies."

"Mo' ho-sies?"

"Yep, a whole stable full of 'em. They belong to the cowboys, the men who work for me. My friend raises and trains horsies, and he's got lots and lots of 'em."

"See horsies?"

"If you want. It'll be a few days before I'm caught up enough to take you and your mama to visit the Barkers, but I'd sure like that." Tess caught him looking at her, and so she smiled slightly to let him know that meeting his friends was a fine idea.

"Home?"

"Soon. I have a new house. It's much bigger than my old one. It's just for me and my father, and now you and your mama. There's even a little bedroom down the hall from ours that'd be good for you."

"An' bankie?"

"And your blankie."

Tess got all warm at the thought of sharing a bedroom—a bed! —with her new husband. She knew it was going to happen, and knew that Cam wouldn't want Jacob sleeping with them, but *Heavens!* The feelings roiling through her certainly were confusing; anticipation for his touch, pique that he was separating her and her baby, nervousness over pleasing him. She was acting like a virgin on her way to the altar.

Her lips pulled down in a frown. She was no wide-eyed innocent. She'd managed her family store after her parents' deaths, and then sold it to start a new life with Joshua when he'd proposed. After his death, she'd birthed and raised their son all alone, managing another store in some of the wildest land in America. She'd seen and done so much in the last three years; things she wouldn't have thought herself capable of back in San Francisco. There was *nothing* about marriage and the marriage bed that should make her flush and lose her breath… but that's exactly what was happening when she thought of Cam holding her, stroking her…

And that's still what she was still thinking of, two hours later, when they climbed a small rise and she was presented with her new home. It was amazing. She'd never been inside anything so grand, much less *lived* there. The house was painted white, with a porch that wrapped all the way around both sides, and beautiful carvings on the overhangs. There were rocking chairs beside the front door, and overgrown flower pots along the steps. Behind and to either side stretched the outbuildings and barns.

Tess couldn't help her wide-eyed expression when she turned to him. "You *are* rich!"

"Not really." But he had the grace to look chagrined. "The house was part of the Selkirk spread. I moved my operation here and kept on some of the Double-S hands. A bunch of 'em left when I sold off so much of the stock to pay Sebastian back. I've got a lot of land now, but not enough beef to run on it. I'm hoping to build my herd back up over the next few years."

"The house is beautiful."

He grinned. "I'm glad you think so. I was a little afraid you'd think it was piddling, after growing up in the city." She just shook her head, and he swung down, keeping Jacob tucked against one shoulder. He led both of their horses into the nearest stable, and put the boy down to run around. Tess made to dismount, but he was there before she could swing her leg around, his strong hands around her waist. He placed her on the ground, but didn't let go right away. "I'm sorry I pushed you so hard today. I wanted to get home." His whisper tickled the hair of her temples, and she had to tamp down on a shiver.

"I understand, and I'm glad. I was tired of traveling."

"Then I hope you're happy with your new home, Mrs. MacLeod."

Oh God, why did he have to be so sexy? Just feeling his breath against her skin caused little frissions of pleasures up and down her spine. But he was still waiting on an answer, so she told him the truth.

"I grew up sharing one room with my parents, but there was so much laughter and fun that I didn't notice how poor we were. In Montana, Jacob and I lived in the store, to protect everything at night." She didn't like the dark look that passed across his features, so she hurried on. "This is the grandest house I can imagine. But a house is only a home if it's filled with happiness."

He stared down at her for a long while, his expression inscrutable. She began to get uncomfortable. Then, finally, he nodded, and his smile looked forced. "You're right, Tessa. Our home has been quiet, but I'm hoping you—and Jacob—will add some joy to our lives."

She'd try, although it'd be as much for her sake as his.

Later, they walked up to the house together, and Cam took her hand like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like they'd known each other for years and were sharing an evening stroll. Tess wondered if, years from now, his casual touch would still make her warm.

They were met on the porch by an older man, obviously Cam's father. He must have been nearly as big as her husband in his prime, but had withered slightly. His pale hair had turned lighter with age, but his green eyes were just as bright. And right now, glaring daggers at them both.

"Where've ye been? A full week ye've been gone, an' I was only expecting five days? Tomorrow I was sendin' out Kelley and Perkins to look for ye."

"Sorry, Da." Cam's smile was unrepentant. "I had a good reason to stick around the fort." He pulled Tess forward, and she was disconcerted to discover that she'd fallen a pace behind. She stuck out her jaw and met Ian MacLeod's angry gaze. "I'd like you to meet my wife, Tess."

If his son's announcement shocked him, Ian didn't let it show. Instead, his expression turned neutral. "Wife, eh? She's too small. Not any bigger than Serena. She'll never give you children."

And as if he'd planned it, Cam smoothly continued, "…and my new step-son, Jake. Jake," he said to the boy hiding his small face in the crook of his neck, "I'd like you to meet my father. You could call him 'Grandda', I guess."

Something changed then, in Ian's expression. A momentary softening, perhaps, before his jaw tightened mulishly once more.

Trying not to let an awkward meeting discolor their relationship, Tess nodded as politely as she was able. “How do you do, Mr. MacLeod?”

“I’d do better if ye young folk learned how to be on time. An’ call me ‘Ian’. I suppose we’re gunna be livin’ on top of one another now.” He sighed and began to limp down the steps. “I’ll go get another two servin’s from the cookhouse. Yers is on the table, boy. I had a feelin’ tonight was the night ye’d show up with some sorta excuse.”

He limped by Tess without a word, and she didn’t let herself turn to watch him go. What a grumpy old man! She wondered how in the world she was supposed to stand being in the same house with him. What if he didn’t work on the range with her new husband? What if she was expected to spend all day trapped in the house with him and Jacob? She sighed. Her new life was certainly surprising her at every turn.

But Cam was standing there, holding her son and waiting for her. She put her hand back in his, and stepped up into her new home, and her new life.

CHAPTER SIX



He woke up with her lying on top of him again. One of his arms was tucked up against her pert little backside, and her lips were nuzzling that really sensitive spot on his neck. He managed not to groan aloud, but it was close. He didn't think he'd *ever* been as aroused as he was at that moment. This was his third day being married, and he still hadn't bedded his wife. Although the way things were going, when it finally happened, Cam figured he would have to call it 'making love'… because he was going to savor every inch of her.

As it was, he couldn't help the way his hand kneaded her rear end, but that was a mistake. In response, she made a sexy little noise and wiggled slightly, and Cam realized that he *could* get even more aroused. So just like the morning before, he forced himself to lie absolutely still and pray she woke up soon.

Dinner last night hadn't gone the way he'd hoped. His father was, as usual, grumpy, and hadn't done anything to welcome Tess. Cam hadn't expected a welcome party, of course—he knew Da too well for that—but he'd hoped that the older man would have at least treated his new wife with politeness. He'd all but ignored Jacob, too. The only saving grace was that Tess was so exhausted, she could barely keep her eyes open. Hopefully she didn't notice Ian's rudeness. She went upstairs to put Jacob down to sleep while Cam explained the last days to his father. When she didn't return, Cam said his goodnights and went to find her. She was curled around her son in the big bed in the large bedroom at the top of the stairs, the one that Cam used because he could sleep diagonally and thus fit on the bed. He'd been looking forward to sharing it with Tess, without the added sharp elbows of a two-year-old. But he'd just smiled and removed her boots for her, and climbed in as well.

And as much as he wanted to be here with her, to help his new wife get acclimated to her new home, he had to leave her this morning. After a full week away, he needed to be out on the range with his men, seeing what had changed and making sure there wasn't anything he needed to deal with. Hopefully he'd be back by that

evening, but it'd mean at least a full day away from her.

This morning, when she woke up, she didn't scramble off him, and he took that as a good sign. She just opened her eyes and stared into his, and he felt it way down in his stomach. Her breath tickled the week's worth of beard on his cheeks, and her fingers made little circles of awareness on his chest.

"Good morning."

"Good morning."

Still whispering, knowing from yesterday that Jacob would wake up jabbering, Cam decided to explain his dilemma. "I'm sorry, Tessa, but I've got to ride out today. To see what's gone wrong since I left. I feel bad leaving you here."

Her face had shadowed slightly, but she shrugged. "I understand. Responsibilities don't stop just because you got married. Will you be home tonight?"

"I hope so." That hand on her backside seemed to have a mind of its own, because it pulled her tighter to him, entirely unbidden. "Will you be here?"

"Of course." Her murmur was distracted, as if she was thinking about something else.

Their lips were only inches apart now. "You think maybe Jacob could start sleeping in his own bed soon?" Cam couldn't help the grin that tugged at his lips at the thought, and was heartened to see her smile in response.

"Why, cowboy? You got something that needs doing?"

She was making a joke? She was always so serious, it was almost his undoing to see her teasing. He closed his eyes and groaned, burying his face in the crook of her neck, using his other arm to lock her in place on top of him. She arched, allowing him better access to her creamy skin, and he was nearly undone then. But then she took charge, lowering her lips to his, and *damn* but it was as good as he'd remembered.

They were both panting when they pulled apart, and he liked the look of wonder on her face. Like she'd been as affected as he'd been. It was a good way to start a marriage.

"Mama eat man?"

They both burst into laughter, and Tess rolled off of him to tend to her son. Cam, for his part, had to lie perfectly still for a bit, until he was sure he could move without embarrassing himself.

He hoped to hell that his business on the range would be over fast, because he *needed* to be back here, holding his wife.



For Tess, the day was a test of patience. Jacob wanted to fully explore *everything*, and she didn't want to give him a free reign to do so with Ian in the house. Obviously the older man disapproved of her, and she assumed it was because of her mixed blood. He'd been rude at their first meeting, grumpy through dinner, and today wasn't shaping up to be any different. He barely spoke to her at all during breakfast, and when she offered to clean up, he told her that he didn't need her help.

So in an effort not to bother him anymore, Tess did her best to keep Jacob out from under her father-in-law's feet. It was stressful for both of them, since the boy was curious enough to poke a sleeping bear. Eventually she had no choice but to take the boy outside, and he seemed to love that. She got to meet two of Cam's hands who'd remained behind to fix a few of the beams in the hayloft. Jacob wanted nothing more than to climb up there to see their work up close, and threw a massive temper tantrum when she told him he couldn't.

She discovered that Ian didn't serve lunch, since everyone was scattered at noon. The privacy suited her well enough, and she was able to feed Jacob some bread and jam before putting him down for a nap in the big bed. She made a mental note to get him used to the small bedroom down the hall, because surely Cam would want the boy to move into his own room tonight. After all, the man probably wanted the privacy of his own room back. And he seemed quite interested in… becoming intimate with her.

She pondered that fact while she kneaded dough for dinner bread. She didn't know where Ian had gone off to, and didn't know what he had planned for the evening meal, but wanted to help. And she was happy to have some time alone… *finally*.

So she was thinking about her new husband as she pulled and pushed the dough across the wooden board. If she'd been asked to describe a 'handsome' man, she would've said light hair, curling slightly because he didn't cut it short enough, bright eyes, a crooked smile, and broad shoulders. And to her utter surprise, such a man really existed. Not only that, but he seemed to be attracted to *her*. He hadn't said it again, not since he'd called her beautiful at the Newell's dinner table. But she'd felt his arousal this morning, and yesterday, and thought that the way he kissed her meant he wanted to do more. Who would have thought it?

She realized that she was staring off into space, and mentally scoffed. He probably just kissed her like that because she was the only woman around. And he was *married* to her, which meant he could kiss her—and do other things—whenever he wanted. Her heart flip-

flopped then, as it did whenever she thought of making love to Cam.

Joshua had been a long-time friend; she'd known him most of her childhood, since he had lived down the street. He'd worked for her father as he got older, and dreamed of owning his own store one day, bringing much-needed goods to the settlers in the wooded frontiers of the north. He'd proposed marriage to her after her parents passed away, but she knew it was because she'd inherited the store and its goods. He'd been a tolerable lover, but Tess hadn't craved his touch.

Not the way she seemed to crave Cam's. She hadn't known a man's touch in well over two years, and surely that was the only reason he could make her breath hitch just by looking at her. Surely that was why her toes curled when he kissed her.

Tess sighed, and hit the dough a little harder than necessary. *Get your head out of the clouds, girl!* Her mother used to tweak her nose as she said it, and it always made Tess happy to hear. She smiled slightly, and tried not to think about her new husband's return, and what might happen that evening.

But dinner came and went with no sign of Cam. Ian grumped back into the house to make a meal; he'd explained that he normally fixed the food out in the cookhouse, and brought their meals to the house, but since most of the men were out on the range, he didn't have to make as much. From his mutterings through the preparation—Tess did everything she could keep Jacob from bothering Ian, which was exhausting—she guessed that he expected her to do the cooking from then on. Fine by her; she just needed to know what and how much to prepare, and she'd start tomorrow.

But by the time dinner was finally prepared, and she'd sat down with Ian and Jacob, Cam still hadn't returned. She tried not to be disappointed, even after she did the washing up… but when it came time to put Jacob to bed, and Cam still wasn't home yet, she began to get anxious.

Jacob didn't want to sleep in the little bedroom by himself, and she spent a further hour cajoling, convincing and finally rocking him to sleep. While normally she cherished her time with her not-so-little-baby, today her stomach was in knots. What could be keeping Cam? He told her he'd be home for dinner. What if he was hurt? What if he'd fallen off his horse or been bitten by a snake or trampled by an angry steer or… or something else horrible that she couldn't even begin to guess? Tess knew that she was woefully ignorant when it came to the dangers of a cattle ranch, but that didn't stop her imagination.

She found herself wandering the house after her son finally fell asleep. She'd been there only one day, but she knew the place; knew

the sounds the floors made upstairs, knew the way the place smelled. It was beginning to feel like a home to her; the first real one she'd had since her parents' death. She wondered if she'd let herself become too attached too soon. What would happen if Cam died? She'd have to find a way to travel to Cheyenne, and earn enough money somehow to pay for a ticket to San Francisco. She didn't want to leave, now, but it would be her only choice.

But more than leaving her new home, the thought of Cam hurt or dead filled her with an intense unease. Her stomach knotted, her skin felt clammy, and her heart beat faster than normal. She'd only met him a few days before! Why would his being in danger make her feel so… so vulnerable, so empty? Was it because he was her husband, and she had come to know and admire him over the last few days traveling? Was it because she knew that he was a good man, a man who deserved to see his dreams become a reality? Or was she becoming… attached to him?

The sun had long since set, and she'd been aimlessly wandering the house in silence. The dining room was dark, as was the study off the foyer decorated in richly masculine wood. But there was a light on in the parlor; a little kerosene lamp set on a side table that cast a small pool of brightness in an otherwise shadowed and empty house. Tess slipped into the room, and was surprised to see her father-in-law sitting in one of the wing-back chairs, staring at the cold fireplace. The room was beautifully decorated, obviously a formal entertaining room, but seemed rarely used. Even after only being here a day, Tess could tell that Cam and his father spent their time in the study or the kitchen. They didn't even take their meals in the dining room. But here was Ian, rough and stooped and looking out of place amid such elegance.

He glanced up when she came into the room, but grunted and turned back to the fireplace. "The boy's asleep?"

It was the first time he'd started a conversation with her, and Tess wasn't sure what to make of it. "Yes. Cam said he could have the small bedroom at the end of the hall."

"Used to be the Selkirks' butler's. Their new house is much bigger."

"Oh." She didn't know what else to say. She knew from her exploring today that there were three bedrooms upstairs; Cam's was the largest and surprisingly feminine for all that it had the biggest bed, with Ian's and the spare being more moderately sized. It sounded like the people Cam bought the home from were quite wealthy indeed.

She stood just inside the door, and he must have been able to sense her hesitation. "What are ye mopin' about, then?"

The question straightened her spine. "I'm not moping."

"Ye've been wanderin' around in the dark fer the last hour. Sounds like mopin' to me."

Tess sighed, not wanting to lie. "I guess…" she crossed to one of the other chairs grouped around the fireplace, and sunk down into it. It was surprisingly uncomfortable. "I guess I'm worried."

"What about?"

"Cam said he'd be back tonight." It was as much as she was willing to say. She didn't want to say what she feared.

But Ian just shrugged, and turned back to the fireplace. "Chasin' beeves is hard work. He probably just got too far out to make it home tonight."

"You really think that's all it is? He's camping out there?"

"Why else?"

She swallowed, and then took a deep breath. "He could be hurt. Or…" her hands seemed to wring of their own accord. She couldn't make them stop, even after she noticed Ian's eyes drawn to the motion.

"Or what?"

"Or… There are so many things that could have gone wrong!" The panic that had been threatening to break free all evening was just barely contained, but Tess could tell that he heard it. He raised one bushy brow at her.

"Ye think he's dead?"

"No. No." It seemed disloyal to think that.

"He's fine." Ian's voice was so sure, it drew Tess out of her anxiety.

"…how do you know?"

"Because he's too good at what he does to die."

His certainty calmed her. She took a deep breath. Part of her wanted to scoff at his surety, to claim that of *course* he wanted to believe the best of his son. But the larger part of her knew that Ian MacLeod knew cattle ranching better than she did, and if he said that Cam was just camping out on the range because he'd traveled too far to make it home, then that must be the truth.

She exhaled, and felt the tenseness leave too. "Alright." And then, because she saw his slight smile, "And what about you? Why are you moping around down here?"

"I'm not mopin'!" His scowl seemed familiar, and she'd only known the man a day.

"Oh really?" She let a teasing lilt into her voice. "You're sitting here in a dark room staring at the wall. That seems lonely to me."

He snorted. "When Cameron's out on the range, it *is* lonely."

And then, Tess understood what he'd been through in the last week. Left here at the ranch, knowing his son would be gone for a few

days, only to have that turn into a week. She had been consumed with worry when Cam was a few hours' late; Ian had to deal with a few *days*. No wonder he'd been angry when they returned. He'd been worried for his son.

And so her voice was softer when she assured him, "Not anymore." At his glance, she clarified. "Now you have Jacob and me to keep you company."

He grunted, and pushed himself to his feet. "I guess so." He turned towards the door, but his path took him by her chair. He placed one hand on her shoulder, briefly, and the gesture warmed her. "Ye're a good wife, Tessa MacLeod."

She couldn't say anything to that. He thought she was good? It was the first positive thing she'd heard him say, much less the first positive thing he'd said about *her*. Her tongue-tie last until he had almost shuffled out the door, and then she spoke up.

"Da!" He turned, shock on his face. What had possessed her to call him that, the way Cam did? Tess didn't know, and couldn't have been able to explain the comfort his certainty, his trust in his son, had given her. Whether or not he'd be anything but a grumpy old man to her, he'd earned her respect in that parlor. Her father had always been "Baba", and there was no reason she couldn't also have a "Da" in her life.

"I can make breakfast tomorrow, if you'd like?" He nodded, and then shrugged, as if he couldn't decide how to respond to her offer of friendship. "You'll have to tell me what to make, and for how many, but I'll make it."

He looked at her for a long moment, and then nodded once more, before closing the door behind him. Tess sat there in the uncomfortable chair until the lamp started to sputter, and thought about her new life. Thought about the challenge of keeping so many men fed. Thought about her new father-in-law, who might not be the gruff curmudgeon he appeared. And she thought about her husband, alone out on the range, who would be returning to her tomorrow.

God willing.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Cam would have liked to make it home last night, but by the time darkness started closing in, he was still working on a stretch of fence in the south-west corner of his original spread. This morning it had taken him six hours just to ride back from there, not to mention all the cowboying he had to do along the way. Several years ago he'd seen the direction cattle ranching was headed, and started putting up fences along certain areas. The era of the open range was coming to an end, and fencing in his herd meant that he could employ less men to mind the cattle. And over the last year he'd drastically culled his herd, in order to pay off Sebastian and own the land free and clear. It had been lucky, since last winter was a harsh one, with a couple of blizzards that would have culled his beef anyhow. The only problem with fences was that they limited other ranchers, and kept them off his property. Men who'd been used to letting their steers roam free for decades now had to contend with barbed wire across their path, and they'd often cut it down in retaliation. That's why Cam hadn't put up fences between any of his neighbors and his water source; Horse Creek was a mighty tempting reason to cut down his fences. For now, everyone had the same access to it.

Downed fences could be a real problem. This one hadn't looked cut, but he couldn't be sure. Maybe an anxious steer just rubbed too hard in the wrong place. Whatever the reason, by the time he and his three hands had gotten it fixed, it was too late to head home. Of course, he was up bright and early this morning, pushing for the ranch, and they ribbed him mercilessly about his eagerness. He just smiled, knowing they were right. His reason for getting home was a tiny bundle of strength named Tess.

He couldn't help his smile as they rode towards the ranch. It was an impressive house; Cam had always admired the spread Stanley Selkirk had built out here. It was the reason he'd courted the man's daughter so ardently. Oh, Cam had convinced himself that he loved her, and maybe he had, in a way. But as Da had said, he loved the *idea* of her—the fine wife in the fine house—more than *her* herself. She was a beautiful porcelain-doll of a woman, and would never have fit

into his life. In the end, she married Cam's new business partner Sebastian Carderock, and Cam had gotten what he'd wanted all along: the Double-S. It was a simple matter to combine the ranches and the men, but mixing the herds had taken a while. It was simpler to just sell off as much of the cattle as possible, and mingle the rest.

Yeah, it was a piece of land a man could be proud of. But now Cam had two more reasons to be proud of it. He had a wife and stepson waiting for him, and suddenly he couldn't wait to see them both. Last night had been hard, knowing he *could* have been home making love to her, but had instead climbed on a horse and ridden away. So Cam was determined to make tonight special.

Sanderson trotted up beside him when Cam slowed by the house. The taciturn man grabbed Cam's reins. "I'll see to your horse."

"Thanks." Cam swung down.

"Go see your family." Sanderson walked both animals towards the stable.

Family. Cam's smile grew. Coming home after a day on the range, knowing Tess and Jacob and Da were waiting for him… for the first time in a long while, he felt complete.

Almost complete. He still ached to hold his wife, and he intended to remedy that as soon as possible. He did his best to dust off his pants and sleeves, and stomp the dirt from his boots, knowing how hard it was to keep the fancy parlor carpets cleaned. When he pushed open the front door, he heard her laughter coming from the back of the house. Like a moth to flame, he was drawn towards the kitchen and the sound of her gaiety.

Crossing his arms and leaning one hip against the doorframe, he watched his father trying to teach his wife how to batter beef chunks. She had two small hand prints on her cheeks, and Jacob was sitting between them—on the counter!—covered in the flour. He was having a grand time, and his antics were making his mother giggle.

Even Ian was smiling when he turned to see his son in the doorway, but he just nodded. "About time ye got home."

"Cam!" He liked the way she whirled to face him, and how her dark eyes lit up. He smiled in response, and was surprised when she threw herself at him. Not caring about the mess, he just wrapped his arms around her and lifted her off the floor. Their kiss was exactly the kind he'd always imagined, when he thought about his wife greeting him after a hard day's work.

She was breathless when she pulled away, but he liked that she didn't blush. She just stared into his eyes and said "I missed you."

"I missed you too." It sounded inane, but her eyes sparkled in response.

"She moped."

Cam lowered Tess until he could see his father. “She did?”

“She worried about ye.”

“Did she?”

“*She* is standing right here.” Tess sounded piqued they were talking about her.

He looked down at her. “*Did* you worry about me?”

She patted his chest. “That’s what wives do.”

He grabbed her hand and placed a kiss on her palm, and was rewarded with a pinking of her cheeks. But he really liked the way she met his eyes and smiled. Belatedly, he realized that she was wearing her blouse and riding skirt again, and that she didn’t own any other clothing. His brows drew in as he kicked himself for not buying her extra clothes at Fort Laramie, whatever the cost. Only a heel would bring his new wife home without an extra set of clothes. Jacob too, for that matter, was still wearing the same ripped trousers. Cam wondered if Serena or her aunts had left any clothing here in the house that he hadn’t noticed, but that wouldn’t help Jacob. He’d have to go to Cheyenne to buy her some material, and hope that she could sew. But that was stupid; her trunk with their things should be in Cheyenne by now, and finding it—if it hadn’t been sold off yet—would mean finding those cowboys she was traveling with and giving them a piece of his mind. The thought lightened Cam’s mood again, and he resolved to plan a visit to the city in the next few days.

“What has you frowning, and then smiling?”

“Just thinking.” He placed another kiss on her palm, and then rubbed small circles with his thumb. He liked the way she sighed and rested her weight against him. “I’m sorry I didn’t get home last night.”

“It’s okay. Your father told me you were fine, and I had no choice but to believe him.”

Cam glanced at his father in surprise, but the old man was listening to Jacob chatter on about something. When it got to be too much, Ian lifted the boy to the floor, pushed him towards Cam, and said “Go say hello to yer father.”

Your father. Cam’s heart tightened at the words, but Jacob didn’t seem to notice their significance. He ran, stumpy elbows pumping, towards Cam’s knees and skidded to a stop. He threw his arms up and bellowed “*Up*!” and Cam had no choice but to swoop him up, laughing.

Holding the boy, with his arm around his new wife, Cam MacLeod felt a contentment he’d never before experienced seep through him. He was finally home.

He felt her gaze, and turned to meet her eyes. There was only one thing missing, and that was the knowledge that she belonged only to him. Slowly he lowered his lips to hers, and felt her smile. He was

going to make love to his wife, and knew it would be worth the wait.



Tess woke on top of her husband, again. It was becoming a habit, and she discovered that she really didn't mind. For someone so big, so hard, he was surprisingly comfortable. Sometime during the night she'd apparently rolled out of his arms and onto his chest. Of course, he was still holding her, one arm heavy against the small of her back. It made her feel protected and cherished. She smiled against his skin, and felt him shift.

That's when she remembered that she was nude. *Oh my*. It wasn't in her nature to be embarrassed by something so natural; she was always practical. But she couldn't seem to help the warmth that spread through her as she remembered *why* she was nude. Why her husband was nude as well.

Last night had been… well, wonderful. Amazing. Nothing in her life—not her mother's vague explanations when she'd been thirteen, nor Tess's brief marriage to Joshua—had prepared her for what she felt in Cam's arms. He'd been gentle, and demanding, and had taken her to Heaven *twice.* Of course, one of the reasons she'd married him was the way his touch made her feel, but she hadn't expected intimacy to be so… so deliciously overwhelming. As someone who was always in control of herself, it had been wonderfully freeing to let her thoughts and reactions go, to just allow herself to revel in the experience of his touch.

His hand moved to cup her backside. She lifted her chin to see two green eyes full of amusement. "Good morning, wife."

She was his wife now, truly. A little surprised, Tess realized that she was pleased. She was no longer solely in control of her life. She no longer had to stand alone. She could lean on her husband; she could rely on him to help her through the rough times, and know that he wanted what was best for her too.

So Tess's smile was big and genuine and caused Cam to blink. "Good morning, Cam." She ran one palm over his chest, and liked the way he twitched when she brushed a nipple, so she did it again. He caught her hand then, and brought her fingers to his lips.

"You keep doing that, and you're not going to get any breakfast."

Her smile was impish as she wiggled against him. "I'm not the least bit hungry for breakfast."

That surprised a laugh out of him, and since she was on his chest, she felt it throughout. "I never figured I'd be lucky enough to

marry a woman like you."

"Like me?"

She felt his other arm come around to knead her rear end, and she didn't bother to suppress the shiver. "Beautiful, but strong too." He squeezed. "And lusty. I like that."

She laughed then, and it felt good. "'Lusty'? Lord, you *do* know how to sweet-talk a woman!"

"I don't have to sweet-talk you," He murmured as one strong hand stroked up her back and pressed her head down towards his, "I'm already married to you."

She smiled against his lips, and brushed her free hand against his nipple again. She liked the way he arched under her touch, so she dropped her hand lower, brushing against his taut stomach. Lower…

As last night, she marveled at his size. Cam was big *all over*, and when she'd first seen him nude, she wondered if they'd ever fit. They did, though, and it had been perfect.

This time was no different.

After, she was sprawled on top of him, legs twined through his, her ear pressed against his chest. She could hear his heart pounding and his heavy breathing, and thought that she might fall asleep again.

"Cam?"

He grunted, and she just smiled against his skin, not sure if she had the words to thank him anyway. For a while, she'd been able to forget herself, forget her past, and just be loved by this man.

But the interlude wasn't to last, and her past had a way of making itself known. "Mama? Mama!" Jacob was pounding on the door, and Tess sat upright and grabbed the sheet before remembering that the boy couldn't turn the door handles yet. Oh God, what if he'd come in?

Cam groaned, and she poked him. "I'm sorry. He has terrible timing."

How could his smile be so arousing, when he looked half-asleep? "If he'd showed up ten minutes ago, I would have called *that* terrible timing."

She had to agree with him, but Jacob was still pounding on the door. She slipped out of bed and wrapped the sheet around herself, thinking to crack the door to assure her son that she was fine, when she heard another voice.

"Come here, Jake. Leave yer Mama and Da alone." She could hear her son's whimper. "They're just gettin' ready for the day. Do ye like flapjacks?" Tess could imagine the toothy smile in response to that. Ian knew the way to the boy's heart. "Come on, we'll make flapjacks for breakfast."

She listened to them climb down the stairs, and then sighed and

turned to see Cam grinning at her.

"What?"

"Seems we've got a champion in Da."

"He's not as grumpy as he seems."

He crossed to her, and enveloped her in a hug. She was too busy holding the sheet up to wonder why. "*I* know that, but you're the first person in a long while to notice."

They hurried through their ablutions, and Tess marveled at how comfortable she felt with this man. Not just in his presence, but the way she dressed in front of him. She hadn't even let Joshua see her without a nightgown. But then, Cam had seen her at her worst, had seen her after carrying her son through the Wyoming nothingness for three days. Cam had seen her then, had seen her since then, and still wanted her.

She didn't understand it, but she marveled nonetheless.

The idea of putting the same blouse on again caused her nose to wrinkle, but it was the only one she had, and there'd been no opportunity for laundry. She didn't even know how they handled washing on the Open Skye; another thing to ask. She was about to pull it over her head when Cam handed her one of his shirts. She took it quizzically, and when he motioned it over her head, she burst out laughing. Laughing twice in one morning was a record for her, and felt wonderful.

"I can't wear this! It'd be a dress on me!"

"Then I'll find you some rope to belt it, and you can roll up the sleeves. It'll be big, but not too bad." It'd be *huge* on her, but it was better than wearing the same darned blouse again, so she started to pull it on. Her head was tangled when she heard him say, "If you can wait another two days, I figured I'd take you into town on Saturday. You could do a little shopping, church on Sunday morning, and back here by dinner."

She pulled the fabric down and stared at him. "Can we afford that?"

He smiled. "*We* can, Mrs. MacLeod. I can't let my wife wear my clothes forever."

His shirt smelled nice. Like him, and the outdoors. It was cozy, but he had to help her roll up the sleeves. Smiling at his chuckle, she admitted he was right. "I guess I do need some new clothes. And Jacob definitely will. If you can spare the time to take us to the city, we'd be grateful."

His kiss was sweet and lingering, and it took all of Tess's will not to lean into it and collapse into his arms again. After, he gave her a quick peck on her eyebrow. "Day after tomorrow, then. I'm looking forward to showing you off to my friends."

Later, she wished he hadn't added that last part. She didn't know what friends he meant, but the idea of meeting new people, people who'd known him for longer than she had, was unnerving. She would always be a half-breed upstart who'd struggled to thrive. She'd had a son and no husband, and that always made people look askance. What would his friends think of her? What would they think of his decision to marry her?

There was nothing she could do about it now, though. Straightening her back, she opened the door and went to meet her new life as Cam's wife.

CHAPTER EIGHT



Cam couldn't believe that he'd been lucky enough to marry someone like Tess. Hell, just the fact that he'd had the sense to *ask* her so soon after meeting her meant that he wasn't quite as hopeless as he'd always thought when it came to women. He must have seen something in her, something to tell him that she'd be perfect for him. They were a good match.

He liked how she was practical, and level-headed. It meant she'd be a real help in the future; running a ranch wasn't easy. She was strong too, and capable. What she didn't know she asked about, and listened, and learned. In the short time he'd known her, Cam knew that Tess would be an asset to the Open Skye.

And, since he was busy complimenting his good sense, he admitted that she would be a fine asset to him, as well. He'd thought that this spark between them was just because he wanted her, wanted to bed her. He figured once he'd had her, his body's reaction to her would calm down a bit. It hadn't. Tasting her had made the craving even worse. Now he *knew* what it was like to hold her, to be inside her, and he wanted it—needed it—even worse. Evening couldn't come fast enough, when he could make love to her again.

Yeah, she was on his mind all right. So much so that Perkins and Smitty had started ribbing him about his distraction. He didn't mind, though, 'cause he figured he was justified. It's not every day a man got to marry a woman as intoxicating as Tess, and he was allowed to daydream about making love to her. Of course, it made for an uncomfortable afternoon, but that was his own damned fault.

On Saturday, after noon, he hitched up the wagon and drove the three of them into Cheyenne. It took a while—even longer by wagon than by horse—but it was worth it, to be able to spend so much time with Tess and Jacob. The boy immediately climbed up in his lap, and insisted on helping him drive the horses. He bounced around on Cam's knees, flicking the reins, and yelling "Yah! Yah ho-sies!" and making them laugh.

After about an hour, Tess pulled her son off, saying "Give Daddy a break, and come have a rest." She told him a tale of a spooky

romance between a man named Chan and a girl named Willow, spread out over several lifetimes. Cam had never heard it before, and was as interested as Jacob. Afterwards, she propped the little boy up on her arm, and sang to him until his eyes closed. The song was a familiar lullaby, and Tess couldn't carry a tune with a bucket. But her husky voice was soothing, and Cam felt at peace listening to her. He found himself watching Jacob's long lashes against chubby cheeks, and the way her lithe fingers—fingers he knew were gentle and confident—stroke through the sweet curls. He felt a longing he couldn't describe, watching her loving her son.

He waited until Jacob was asleep before saying quietly, "You mean that? About me being Jake's Daddy?"

She kept her gaze fixed on the little boy. "If you want to be. Jacob will never know a father besides you, and I think you'd be a fine Daddy." Cam had to swallow past the lump in his throat. "I know that it's hard for a man to care for a kid that's not his own, but if you're willing to pretend…"

"I'll love him like my own."

She looked at him, then, face blank. "Really?" She didn't believe him, so he nodded.

"Really. Family ain't always about blood, Tessa. It'd be impossible not to love the little guy. He's already taught me more about being a father than I would have guessed."

He glanced at her, and watched her expression soften. He loved the way her brows showed her mood; up high for surprise and happiness, pulled in tightly to meet over her nose when she was concerned. Now, they slowly drooped at the outer corners, and he saw something in her eyes he'd never seen before. She looked away before he could guess what it was.

But her free hand found his forearm, and he shifted the reins to be able to twine his fingers through hers. He squeezed, and felt her squeeze back, and knew that she understood him. This woman and this child were now his life, and he couldn't be happier.



Cheyenne was *huge*. Tess hadn't seen anything like it since San Francisco, and even then the two cities couldn't really compare. Cheyenne, Wyoming had been built practically overnight, going from nothingness to a real city in less than a year when the railroad came through. Now it had tall buildings, elegant hotels, streets and streets of stores and amenities, and wires criss-crossing the streets, bringing light and telephone service to the wealthiest families. And the people!

There were women dressed in fashions Tess had never seen, and she had to assume it was because she'd been so far from civilization for so long. Of course, even if she *had* been back in San Francisco, she couldn't have afforded to dress in such gorgeous gowns. She found herself turning on the wagon's seat to follow a woman whose rear end seemed three times bigger than it ought to be. She'd known bustles were all the rage, but she hadn't realized they were getting so *big*.

Cam chuckled at her, and she smiled in return, admitting that she was gawking as badly as her son. Jacob was perched on his new father's knees again, chattering non-stop about this amazing new place.

They turned off the main street onto an avenue lined with beautiful homes, some of them still being constructed. As they passed one almost-complete house, Cam pointed to it and explained that his business partner was having it built. In the meantime, the Carderocks were still living with Serena's aunts, which was where Cam was taking his new family this afternoon.

Tess had heard about Serena Selkirk Carderock. It was hard not to, since the woman had owned the Open Skye back when it was the Double-S. Even Ian had compared Tess to Serena, saying that they were the same size. This Serena must be tiny as well, then.

But Tess had played enough poker to understand tells, and Cam's worried her. There was something he wasn't telling her about this Serena Selkirk, something they had shared in the past. It wasn't obvious, but once or twice, in talking about her, Cam had gotten uncomfortable. Tess wondered what had passed between the two of them before Serena had married Cam's partner. And it worried her that she was concerned about Cam's past. What did it matter? It wasn't like she had a claim to him then. Goodness, she didn't even have a claim to him *now*. No matter how much she enjoyed being married to him, it wasn't like she was in love with the man, or he with her. What did it matter if he'd once had feelings for his partner's wife?

Tess shifted uncomfortably on her seat as she realized that somehow, it *did* matter. She didn't like these childish feelings of jealousy. She was a grown woman, and should be able to handle this marriage—and the feelings it evoked—in a rational manner. She'd married Cam because he offered her safety and stability; Cam's feelings for another woman, or Tess's surprisingly possessive feelings about *him*, shouldn't matter at all. Right? She squeezed her eyes shut and stifled her sigh. In spite of all her attempts to convince herself to be logical, the jealousy still bubbled in the pit of her stomach. Meeting Serena wasn't going to be easy.

He pulled to a stop in front of a house that was even more impressive than the ranch house Tess now lived in. She'd known the

Selkirks were rich, but to see *this* home just made it more obvious. She self-consciously smoothed down her skirt—still dirty, despite her best efforts to clean up her only clothes—and wondered how Cam could help but compare her to Serena. Tess knew the other woman was beautiful, and now to find out that she was rich… well, her self-esteem could only take so much.

She knew her feet were dragging when Cam led her to the porch.

"Do they know we're coming?" She tried to run her fingers through Jacob's curls, and wipe the dirt off of his cheeks, but the boy squirmed out of her reach. Cam had him up on his shoulder, and Jacob loved being so high up, knowing she couldn't reach him easily.

"Nope, but it'll be okay." Cam glanced at her, and her worry must have shown, because he bent down to kiss her. As always, his kiss left her feeling a little dizzy and in need of support when he pulled away, so she was sure she had a stupid bemused expression on her face when the door finally opened.

"Brixley! How've you been?"

The older black gentleman at the door cracked a smile at her husband's exuberant greeting, and Tess liked him for it.

"Doing fine, sir, doing fine. The ladies are in the parlor." He stepped back to let them in, and Cam introduced her as they passed.

"Brix, this is my wife, Tess MacLeod, and my new son, Jacob." She could hear the pride in his voice.

She didn't give the old man time to react to that bit of news before she put out her hand to greet him. "How do you do, Mr. Brixley?"

He looked shocked, but she didn't know why. Maybe she'd broken some rule of etiquette by offering to shake his hand, but she didn't care. He slowly shook it, peering at her. "Nice to meet you, Mrs. MacLeod." Then, to Cam, "Lord, Mr. MacLeod, you sure can pick 'em."

"I know, right?"

She waited until Brixley had moved down the foyer before pinching Cam. "What was that about?" she whispered.

Her husband smiled that crooked little grin she liked so much, but she didn't let herself be distracted. "You surprised him. He's saying you're as pretty as Serena."

She didn't know how to respond to that, so she didn't. And then, moments later, after she'd actually been *introduced* to Serena, Tess decided that both men were absolutely wrong.

There was *no way* she was *anywhere* near as pretty as Serena Selkirk Carderock. The woman was… stunning. Pristine. She looked like a porcelain doll that had come to life. She had the palest skin Tess had ever seen, with hair so light it looked silver, and eyes a soft shade

of lavender. Tess actually backed up when the woman came over to embrace her, afraid that she'd somehow break or dirty this perfect creature. She recovered in time that she didn't think she caused any rudeness, and allowed herself to be hugged tightly. After, though, she used Jacob as an excuse to move away from Serena, determined not to stand next to her, and remind Cam how much uglier she was.

Her husband, for his part, had embraced Serena like an old friend, and Tess hadn't seen any wistfulness there from either party. Still, she could shake her vague unease at seeing them together.

Serena wasn't just gorgeous, but open and friendly too. She insisted they join her and her aunts—the two identical older women chatting happily with Cam—for dinner and overnight. Cam immediately took her up on the offer, but explained he had to take care of some 'business' first.

"Where's Sebastian?"

"Still at school, but should be home soon."

"He's still walking there and back?" At Serena's nod, Cam shoved his hat back on his head. "Good, I'll go pick him up. Think I'll need his help with this." Before Tess could react to the news that he was leaving her here with these strangers, he'd kissed her goodbye, admonished Jacob to "mind his mother", and was out the door.

And Tess was left alone with what surely must be the most beautiful woman in the world. It was impossible not to compare herself to Serena, especially after everything she'd heard about the other woman. She felt her fists clenching, just imagining Cam with this vision. After knowing Serena, how could he possibly have found Tess lovely? How could he have called her beautiful?

It would have been easy to hate Serena, but she made it impossible. Just a few minutes with her showed Tess that she was a kind, outgoing, and thoughtful young lady. Her twin aunts, Agnes and Agatha, were just as sweet, and had an adorable habit of finishing each other's sentences. Tess still felt dowdy next to such refinement, but the three women did their best to make her comfortable.

Jacob, thank goodness, was on his best behavior, and seemed to relish the attention the Agnes and Agatha gave him. He overcame his shyness, and was entertaining without being obnoxious or troublesome. The best any mother of a two-year-old could hope for, truly.

Brixley brought them all tea and cookies—for which Jacob's polite "bank you!" sent the older ladies into spasms of "awww!"—and Serena kept up a running conversation. Tess soon found out that the younger woman had been married a little over a year to a man who must surely be a paragon, judging from his description. In a few short minutes, his wife called him "divinely handsome", "the most

intelligent man", and "so very noble." Add into that his obvious wealth and caring—he was a math teacher at the large public school in the city—and Sebastian Carderock must be a very special person. Tess mentioned that when Serena paused, and the younger woman sighed dreamily.

"Oh! Oh, he is! Just wait until you meet him, Tess!" A teasing look came to those lavender eyes. "Of course, don't look too hard, he's mine. Not that you'd want to, with Cam nearby. He's quite the handsome man himself, isn't he?" Tess had been scoffing at her earlier worry over Cam and Serena together, because the younger woman was obviously head-over-heels in love with her husband, but now she hesitated.

Serena smiled. "Come now, admit it! Cameron MacLeod is surely the second-most-handsome man in Cheyenne."

Alarmed by the feelings of jealousy this perfectly kind lady was causing, Tess tried her best to smile convincingly. "Well, I've never met your husband, so I can't say…"

Serena laughed. "Okay, then I suppose he's the *most* handsome man you've ever seen!"

Tess laughed weakly, and allowed that Cam *was* an attractive man. Jacob came over at that point, and one of the two aunts—Tess would never be able to tell them apart—spoke up. "I heard Cam introduce the boy as his son."

Tess felt her brows draw in defensively. "It was Cam's idea. I—*we*—think it best that Jacob grow up knowing a father."

The older woman *tsked*, and her sister cut in. "Don't be silly, girl, of *course* it's a good idea. We think it's admirable. It takes a rare man to love a child not his own seed."

Tess hugged Jacob. Cam *was* a rare man. And Serena was right; he *was* the most handsome man Tess had ever met. So what did a man so noble, so handsome, want with her?

"If you don't mind us asking, dear—"

Her twin interrupted, "How did you two meet?"

And Tess found herself telling the entire story. The three of them sighed dreamily when she got to the part about Cam rescuing them, and then again when he proposed. She couldn't help but smile at their enthusiasm for her marriage, and took turns exclaiming at length about how perfect she was for Cam. She was feeling much more comfortable with the three of them when Brixley stepped in to hand Serena a note that had just been delivered. Apparently Sebastian and Cam's business would take them longer than expected, and they wanted the ladies to go on and have supper without them.

The meal was surprisingly informal, what with the older ladies telling stories that had them all dissolving into peals of laughter, and

Jacob trying his best to charm everyone with his songs. But he didn't throw anything, and Brixley had some cookies waiting when the boy finished his meal, so the ladies could linger over their supper. Tess learned all about Serena and Sebastian's courtship, and how successful Sebastian had become in the past year. Serena taught literature at the school with her husband two days a week, but Sebastian was one of the top teachers there. He not only taught and tutored math, but gave music lessons and coached the ball team as well. Tess could tell that the two of them were dedicated to making the students' lives as fulfilling and rewarding as possible, and she admired them both for it.

"And do you want to know the best part about Sebastian's work?" Serena leaned in, as if imparting a secret. "We now have *three* deaf students at the school!"

Tess had never heard of anything like that. Students who couldn't hear, learning alongside… *normal* students? Her polite disbelief must have shown, because Serena nodded. "One of my friends—the younger sister of my best friend, Wendy—became deaf when she was a young girl. She learned to use her hands to communicate, but could read lips. Her sister Molly—have you met Molly and Ash yet? No? Oh, you *have* to get Cam to take you out to their spread! They're your neighbors, you know. Anyhow, Molly convinced the Superintendent to hire a teacher who had experience with deaf students, and that's how Sebastian found his way out here! He's a first-rate oralist, and is using the techniques to teach Annie… and now two other students from the Territory have moved to Cheyenne to join her!"

"Goodness!" Tess hadn't realized that such a thing was even possible, and had so many questions. "That's… that's wonderful! Does she like it? Can I meet her?"

Serena laughed, and Tess found herself smiling too. "She *loves* it! She's home now, but will be back as soon as the autumn half starts again. She stays here with us. Or at least," she shot her aunts a look, "Until Sebastian and I move out. Then she'll probably come stay with us."

"We're leaning her 'sign language' as fast as we can, young lady __"

"—So that she can stay here with us instead. We want to keep her!"

They all laughed again, even Jacob, and by the time they were ready to retire, Tess was utterly comfortable with Serena and her aunts. She still thought Serena to be the most beautiful woman she'd ever met, but also knew the younger lady had much more important traits. She found herself hoping that they could remain friends. When was the last time she'd had a real friend…? Tess honestly couldn't

remember ever having one. There had been her mother, and then Joshua. But Tess had always had to keep her own counsel, and make her own decisions. It felt wonderful to be able to relax with other women.

Serena showed her to a small room. “I know you’ll be cramped, but I don’t think *any* of our beds would be big enough for Cam. I don’t know how he manages it out at the Double—sorry, the Open Skye.”

“He sleeps diagonally across the bed.”

Serena blinked, and then laughed. “Oh! I guess it works because you’re so tiny!” Tess laughed too, and she continued, “This is Annie’s room usually. She’s sprouted in the last year, and is now taller than me! I’m sorry to cram you all in here.”

The room was small, but elegant, and Tess smiled warmly. “Thank you *so* much for your hospitality. I know we showed up last-minute—”

“I would have never forgiven Cam if he hadn’t brought you here as soon as humanly possible.” Serena surprised her with a hug, and Tess surprised herself by hugging the other woman back. “I just know we’re going to be the best of friends,” Serena whispered in her ear.

Tess was still smiling when she tucked an exhausted Jacob into the pallet Brixley had prepared beside the bed, and slipped into the borrowed nightgown. All three ladies had made a to-do over Tess’s lack of wardrobe—judging from their own gowns and the house, they’d never had to do without fine things—and Serena immediately fetched some clothing to loan her new friend. Tess was grateful, and was looking forward to shopping for some material tomorrow.

When was the last time she’d been able to spend a day shopping? She’d always been in charge of her own inventory, so things were ordered sight unseen. For that matter, when did she last have the chance to spend an evening with three delightful ladies? And when did she ever know a man—as Serena said—as handsome as Cam?

She fell asleep wondering when her husband was coming back, and if she should be worried.

CHAPTER NINE



"Hmmmm." Cam stretched, his eyes still closed. He felt his wife's mouth on his neck, felt her weight on his chest. "I could get used to this."

"Me too." Tess's voice was the barest whisper, but he felt it. He knew that Jacob was sleeping on the floor beside them, and as she skimmed one small palm against his chest, Cam regretted that fact. He'd come in too late last night to make love to her, but dearly wanted to. And if he didn't know his step-son was sprawled not six feet away now, he'd make up the lost time right now. As it was, he contented himself with a sigh and nuzzling her hair.

"Cameron MacLeod!" This time her whisper was far from soft; she sounded fit to be tied. He peeked through one eye and saw her glaring down at his face. Oh, yeah. He'd forgotten about last night's adventure. "*What* did you do to your face?"

Cam had glanced in the mirror down in the foyer when he'd returned with Sebastian last night, so he knew what she saw. There was a big purple bruise high on one cheekbone, where a fist aimed for his eye didn't quite have the reach it needed, and his lip was split close to the corner of his mouth. Still, he tried his most innocent smile on her.

Tess glared in response, but then her eyes grew wide as a thought occurred. "Oh Lord, don't tell me you got into a fight with Sebastian? In the man's own home?"

"Nah, he looks better than me, only got in one or two punches." Still, they'd been useful punches. "If we'd got in a fight, he wouldn't be quite so pretty." Cam had hit Sebastian once, last year, and though his partner hadn't hit him back, Cam had guessed then that Sebastian had a mean jab. He'd been right.

She didn't look amused at his joke. "Cam. What happened? What where you doing while we sat here worrying about you?"

"You worried about me, again?" He smiled at the thought, and managed to stifle his wince as it pulled his broken lip.

But she was honest, and shrugged, losing what he now realized was a faked stern glare. "No, because we thought you were off on

‘business’. Did Serena know what you were up to?”

“Sweetheart, even Sebastian didn’t know ‘til I picked him up. He’s the only man I know who prefers walking to riding.”

“*What happened*?”

He wasn’t going to tell her everything. About how he and Sebastian split up to search through the cattle district until they found the names of the trio of cowboys Tess had traveled south with. About tracking them down—at least, the leader and his mean-looking friend—and asking them politely what they’d done with her trunk. About how pleased Cam had been when they’d refused to talk, and how much pleasure he’d taken from beating the information out of them. Sebastian had helped, but had let his friend have his revenge. No, Cam wasn’t going to tell Tess that Willis and Crowley wouldn’t threaten another woman again. But he *would* tell her the good news. “I got something for you.”

She was unimpressed. “You can’t sweeten me up with gifts, Cam.”

“Maybe.” He pulled her close to him and then sat up, smiling at the way she pressed against him. Turning her in his arms, he jerked his chin towards the wooden chest in the corner. It had weighed a ton, and hadn’t been easy to sneak into the room while she slept, but seeing the look on her face now, he was glad he’d gone through the effort.

“Oh,” she breathed. “Cam, is that…?” He saw the tears in her eyes when she turned back to him, and the hesitant hope. He wondered what her life had been like, that such a simple thing as having her stuff back could bring on this response. He hadn’t seen her cry when she’d been stuck out on the prairie for three days. But she could cry over a chest?

So his voice was gruff as he apologized. “I’m sorry you won’t get the chance to shop for a whole new wardrobe. I was looking forward to spoiling you some.”

“You found my trunk?” At his nod, she lifted one small hand to his cheek, and he felt her touch clear down to his soul. “You went after Willis and the others, didn’t you? That’s how you found my things. That’s how you got these bruises?”

He nodded again, but to distract her from further questions, said “I don’t know if everything’s there. They were trying to sell the whole thing, so stuff might be missing.”

He’d never seen her so excited to get out of bed, trying to untangle her feet. They both stilled, though, when they heard the sleepy little voice call “Mama?” Then again, more awake: “Mama, sun is up, moon is down.”

Tess sighed. “Good morning, Jacob.”

"Hi!" Two big eyes peeked over the edge of the bed, and Cam rumbled the boy's curls.

"Morning, kiddo." He lifted Jacob up to sit on the bed with him while Tess almost tripped across the room to kneel in front of the trunk. He was distracted by his curious stepson—who, it turned out, loved to play 'cave' under the blanket—but watched her reverently remove bundles and lay them beside her.

She was smiling when she turned back to him. "It's all here, I think!" Drawing herself to her feet, she joined them on the bed under Jacob's blanket cave. Hugging Cam, she said only "Thank you. Thank you *so* much for saving us, and returning our things to us."

What could he do, but hug her back?

Later, after church and a quick meal, they were perched side-by-side on the wagon bench headed back to the Open Skye. Jacob was sitting behind them, playing with a set of wooden blocks his mother had stored in the trunk. He seemed happy to have his toys back.

It was another scorcher of a day, this late in the season. Cam's sleeves were rolled up, and his hat perched high on his head. Tess was turned half in her seat, so that she could keep an eye on Jacob, and looked good enough to eat in that high-necked blouse. He liked that she'd had her own clothes to wear to church this morning, and he liked it even more that she'd unbuttoned the collar as soon as they were in the wagon, and he caught tantalizing glimpses of creamy skin whenever she moved.

"What'd you think of Serena?" He'd noticed the goodbye hug the two women had shared seemed sincere, and Serena had promised to browbeat Sebastian into coming out to the ranch soon.

So he didn't understand why her look grew guarded. "She was lovely. Very kind, and so generous."

"Yeah. I was hoping you two would be friends."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "I bought the ranch from her, and she's married to my partner. I figured it'd be nice for you to get along."

"That's the only reason?"

Luckily, the horses knew the route, so Cam could focus on his wife. "Yeah. What'd you think I meant?"

Now Tess was avoiding his eyes. "She's beautiful."

"Yeah. So?"

"I just wondered…" And now she looked at him, and he saw the sadness in her dark eyes. "I thought maybe there was more between you."

He probably should have denied it right away, and when he didn't, her expression hardened, her back straightened, and she looked ahead again. Cam followed her lead, his elbows braced on his knees,

wondering how to explain.

Finally, he tried. “The Selkirks were my neighbors for years. I’ll show you the house I built, when I first came out here. It’s… small.” It was a hovel compared to their current home, but he was proud of the work he’d put into it, all those years ago. “I watched Serena grow up, grow into the most pristinely beautiful woman I could imagine. I wanted her.” He watched her hands twist together, out of the corner of his eye, and he rushed to get through it. “I even thought I loved her, wanted to marry her.”

“That’s enough,” she whispered, but he ignored her objection.

“It took meeting Sebastian, seeing the way she looked at him and he looked at her, to realize that I didn’t love her. I wanted to be married, to start a family. I wanted the Double-S, and she was a convenient way to get it.” Jacob was talking to himself behind them, but Cam focused on the boy’s mother, determined to make her understand. “I never loved her, not the way…”

Tess’s eyes were wide as he trailed off. He wrapped the reins around the brake and pulled her into his lap. She squirmed, but he held tightly. “Tessa, when I first saw you, I didn’t believe you were real. You were so…” he took a breath. “I’d never seen anyone so captivating. So strong, and brave, for such a little thing! You’re exotic, and interesting, and…” he knew he was making a mess of the explanation. He squeezed his eyes closed and dropped his forehead to hers, so that he didn’t have to see the confusion on her face. “I’m trying to say that you’re beautiful. No, you’re more than beautiful, you’re gorgeous. I wanted you more than any woman I’d ever met.”

“Don’t—”

“It’s true!” He was quick to interrupt. “Serena is like a porcelain doll, perfect and untouchable. You… you’re earthy and erotic and,” he started dropping kisses down her cheek to her neck, and when she tilted her head to give him better access, he groaned. “And from the moment I saw you, I *really* wanted to touch you. Everywhere.”

With his lips against her skin, he continued. “And it’s not just that you’re beautiful, Tessa. You’re courageous and capable and a good match for me. I’ve been dreaming about finding a wife like you for a long time, and starting a family.” He squeezed her, and was heartened when he felt her arms snake around his neck. “And since you brought me Jake, I don’t even have to wait on that. This morning you thanked me for saving you,” he pulled back so he could look into her serious eyes, “but the fact is, Tessa, you saved *me*. You’re everything I could imagine. It’s gunna be easy to fall for you, sweetheart.”

Her brows were high, her eyes wide. But she didn’t say anything, and he wondered what she was thinking.

“Tessa?”

She dropped her cheek to his shoulder. He wished he could see her expression, but he liked holding her. “No one’s ever said things like that to me. You’re quite the romantic, Cam.”

“Just for you, Tessa.” He kissed the top of her head, and waited for her to say more.

She didn’t, but was willing to stay curled against him for the remainder of the trip home.

CHAPTER TEN



It's gunna be easy to fall for you, sweetheart.

What did that mean? Had he 'fallen' already? What did 'fall' mean, anyhow? Cam was such a wonderful man—kind and hard-working and oh-so-sexy—and she was just… well, just Tess. It was hard to imagine why he would 'fall' for someone so…unremarkable.

She'd grown up knowing that there was nothing special about her. In fact, many looked at her with pity, because of her mixed blood. Her parents loved her, but they hadn't told her often. Her mother had grown bitter in the years before she'd met *Baba*, and could be hard. *Baba* was caring and sweet, but had been raised not to speak of his feelings. Tess had always been comforted and cherished, but the Li family rarely spoke of 'love'.

Is that what Cam was talking about? Was he falling in love with her? The thought made Tess uncomfortable, as she went about her duties. Why would someone like him fall in love with her? *How*? Her insides knotted at the idea, and she felt herself draw in on herself, like she wanted to protect her heart. He might be falling for her, but she wasn't falling for him. He was remarkable, yes, but he was just her husband. She married him because she and Jacob needed a place, a place to belong. They needed a home and a way to survive, and Cam offered that. Sure, she liked being married to him. She liked his personality, and how hard he worked to follow his dream, and she definitely liked the way he made her feel when he touched her. But that wasn't love. Love was something… something more. Something delicate and fragile with wings and…

She frowned. Well, okay; she didn't know what love was. But she'd darn well know if she was *in* love! …Wouldn't she?

The quandary occupied her as she grew comfortable in her new life. Her days were spent taking care of the house—after a year of insufficient cleaning, it needed some upkeep—and cooking. She and Ian would make breakfast and dinner for their little family, and the hands. As he let her take more responsibility, he was able to go out on the range more often, leaving her and Jacob alone in the house. She could tell that the grumpy old man appreciated not having to do as

much, and it seemed like he was happier these days.

Jacob became acclimated to his new home, and she became more comfortable allowing him outside on his own. She still preferred to be with him—especially after Ian told her about the snakes they sometimes found—but he'd often occupy himself out on the porch while she cooked. Cam was busy with the ranch work, but would make a point of taking Jacob into the stable to take care of "the horsies" every evening. The boy loved it; Tess didn't know if it was the independence from her, or the chance to be with Cam, or the animals, but it was his favorite part of the day. She didn't know everything that went on during that time, but Jacob always returned excited and full of energy. He was learning new words left and right—frankly, she was impressed that the cowboys hadn't taught him anything too inappropriate—and she came to cherish the hour of blissful peace and quiet in the house alone.

Her days were filled with hard work and laughter. Sometimes—wash days, particular—she was plumb wore out by dinner, but it was a *good* exhaustion; an exhaustion caused by knowing that she was part of a team that was making the Open Skye a success. She saw her husband at the dinner table, and knew that he was working just as hard, and that she'd begun to share his dream of a prosperous cattle ranch. Sometimes, he would reach across and hold her hand as they said Grace, and she would feel a sense of peace and comfort she'd never known.

Yes, her days were filled with hard work, but her nights…! Her nights were for Cam. Sometimes she wouldn't see him at all between dawn and dusk—and sometimes he'd be gone for more than one day—but he would always kiss her, first thing back. She'd wrinkle her nose and complain of his sweat and dirt and pretend like she didn't want to throw her arms around him and kiss him back. And he would laugh, and wink at her, and she'd feel something melt, deep inside. At night, after they made love, they'd hold each other and talk about their day, or their plans, or the future. She adored listening to him talk about his time with Jacob, and he seemed interested in her suggestions for success. Cam recognized that she had years of experience running a store, and understood money. He'd ask her opinion, and when she realized that he was following her suggestions, she became even more determined to help make the Open Skye a success.

One afternoon, during Jacob's nap, she was straightening up Cam's study. It was a cozy room across the foyer from the parlor, with a big desk and mostly empty bookshelves. Neither she nor her husband had much time for reading, but she'd placed her few cherished children's rhyme books up on the shelves. Cam's journals and record-books were up there too… and all over the desk. It seemed

that he was as messy as his father when it came to paperwork. Smiling to herself, Tess was tidying up the stacks when the open book on the desk caught her eye. Twisting around so that she could see the entries better, Tess narrowed her eyes. The number in the sum column was wrong. *Very* wrong. She frowned, and hurried to slip the bundle of papers she was holding into the top drawer. Then she perched in Cam's big chair and rummaged around to find a pencil. With the late-afternoon light streaming through the now-clean glass in the front windows, Tess bent over the books, and checked her husband's arithmetic.

She muttered to herself, an old habit she'd picked up from her mother when doing sums. Sure, she was worried about the numbers being wrong, but she was happy to be tallying again. She'd always enjoyed the clear simplicity of sums, and had started keeping the store's books at a young age. Joshua had been smart enough to put her in charge of the purchasing and inventory, and it made her feel in control of the world, if just for a few minutes.

More than a few minutes—probably a half-hour—passed before she figured out what the problem was. She'd marked up Cam's columns and tallies, becoming increasingly frantic, wondering *how* he'd managed to run a ranch this long with no idea how to add properly… when she blinked and squinted at the page, and watched the numbers reorder themselves. Blowing out an exasperated breath, Tess sat back. *There's the problem!*

Her husband, bless his heart, had *terrible* handwriting. She'd noticed it right away, but hadn't realized how bad it was. Cam's fours and his nines seemed interchangeable, and only a certain amount of examination proved that he started his fours at the bottom of the line, and his nines and the top, and they looped in different directions. And his sevens and twos could be tricky too, if he neglected to lift up his pencil before crossing the seven. A relieved chuckle slipped out, and Tess rubbed her eyes.

Bending forward again, she started to laboriously go back through her husband's work, ignoring her own edits to determine which sums were originally correct. That's how he found her, hunched over his desk, chewing on her lip.

The door opened with its usual slight creak, and she held up her finger to warn him not to interrupt her. Without looking up, she kept up her muttered additions, "One seventy-four, seventy-eight, ninety…six, two hundred and six, two hundred and thirty-six. Good, yes."

Jotting down her total, she compared it to Cam's, and nodded approvingly. She straightened then, curious to see how her husband would react to her double-checking his work. But he didn't look

concerned. His hip was cocked against the doorframe, and he had his sleeves rolled up to reveal those glorious forearms, folded easily across his chest. Was it her imagination, or did the sunlight make him glow golden? She caught her breath, as she did at least once a day, realizing that she was married to the sexiest man in creation.

There was just the faintest grin—that crooked little one that always made her stomach tighten—on his lips, and a strange look in his eyes. They were soft, like he was looking straight into her soul, and liked what he saw. She was suddenly reminded of what he'd said on the way back from town, about how he had wanted her as soon as he'd seen her, and how he thought she was beautiful. When he looked at her like he was looking now, she *felt* beautiful.

Then, slowly, his gaze changed. His eyes were knowing, and sensual, and watching her like he wanted something from her… and wanted it now. *Oh my.* Tess swallowed past a suddenly dry throat, wondering how the man could make her want him with something as simple as a glance.

In an effort to distract herself, she blurted out, "I'm sorry! I probably shouldn't have touched them, but your numbers looked so wrong. Your nines… and your sevens… and…" she trailed off when she realized what a mess she was making of the explanation.

Cam pushed away from the doorframe and stepped into the room. There was wariness now, on his face. "What?"

"I…" She took a deep breath, "I was cleaning, and your sums were incorrect, so I checked them."

His face clouded with anger now, he crossed to the desk and frowned down at the open book, and all of her marks. She pushed away, and then forced herself to exhale. Cam might be angry, but he'd never hurt her. She'd noticed that her husband had strong emotions; his sudden bursts of laughter or lust were familiar and appealing. Likewise, he could turn angry in a heartbeat. She'd never seen him angry at *her* before, though.

Then he turned those green eyes on her again, and she realized she'd been wrong; Cam wasn't angry at her. He was angry at the thought that his bookkeeping was off. She hastened to assure him. "They're not as bad as I thought, though!" Golden brows drew in, and she bent back over the books again, in an effort to explain. "See? I was having a hard time telling your nines and fours apart, and sometimes your twos and sevens. But once I did, almost everything added up correctly."

"*Almost* everything?"

"Well…" she sucked on her lower lip for a moment, and then flipped back three pages. Pointing at a column on the left, she followed it down to the last row. "I *think* you're off a few dollars

here." Another page, another column. "And here, it looks like you overpaid Smitty in June by two dollars and seventy-five cents."

His relieved chuckle surprised her, and he smiled at her reaction. His moods! How could he let go of his anger so quickly? He grabbed her left hand and brought her palm to his lips. "Two dollars and seventy-five cents, sweetheart?" She shivered at the endearment. "I thought you meant something *big*. Some big miscalculation."

Frowning, she pulled her hand away. "You're not so rich that you can afford to throw away money, Cam."

"*We're* not rich, Tessa, but we're not throwing it away. What's a few dollars, give or take?"

"'What's a few…'?" Tess trailed off incredulously. "We can't afford to live like that! Everything must be accounted for. That's why your sums—and your atrocious handwriting—are so important!"

Chuckling now at her ire, he leaned his hip against the desk. "My records are always off by a few dollars, here and there." He shrugged. "I'm not the best at sums, but I've managed to get by all these years."

She gasped. She actually gasped aloud at the thought of trying to run a business with such an attitude. "Cam MacLeod! You owe Sebastian thousands of dollars—I've *seen* the contract!—and you're not concerned with every penny? How could you *possibly* expect to run a ranch, to grow the Open Skye into your dream, thinking like that?"

He shrugged again. "Sebastian's good at math, and I trust him not to cheat me. Like I said, my sums never balance perfectly anyhow. Sometimes I've spent a little more than I realized, and sometimes I've got more than I expected at the end of the month. I just deal with it."

"'Deal with it'?" Tess didn't care that she sounded like a parrot —a shrill parrot. She couldn't help it. "Absolutely not. You married me, Cam. I'm part of the Open Skye now, right?"

He was still grinning when he nodded, but she didn't let herself notice. Snatching up her pencil again, she plopped herself right back down in his chair. Not caring that he now towered over her, she pulled the ledger back towards her. "Then I'm going to do your books. No, don't argue," although he didn't look like he was going to say a word. "I'm pretty good with sums, if I do say so, and my handwriting is considerably neater than yours. *I* will keep the Open Sky's books, and *I* will make sure that we don't lose even 'a few dollars'."

But she couldn't keep up her act of pretending great interest in the numbers in front of her. Before long, she'd peeked up at him, to find that crooked grin back on his face. She stuck out her chin. "Well? Aren't you going to say anything?"

"Oh, am I allowed to, now?" he teased. She narrowed her eyes

at him, and he chuckled. “I think that, since you’re so determined, it’d be stupid of me to get in your way.” He reached out, and brushed a rough finger over the back of her hand, where it lay on the ledger. “I admire that about you, Tessa. How determined you are. How strong. You’re just what the Open Skye needs.” Almost against her will, her gaze was drawn to his. “You’re just what I need.”

Turning her hand, she twined her fingers through his. “And you’re just what Jacob and I need.”

He squeezed, and smiled, and a sudden, certain thought sprang into her mind. Narrowing her eyes, she stood up. She tilted her head and glared up at him. “Cameron MacLeod. Did you just manipulate me into keeping your ledgers?”

Still smiling, he took her hand in both of his, and started drawing small circles on the back of it. “You’re better at it than I am, Tessa. I wouldn’t have asked you, but…”

She sighed. “But I could get affronted and demand to do it?” He shrugged, and didn’t look at all repentant. “Wait a minute. All of that ‘it’s just a few dollars’ nonsense? Surely that was all claptrap to get me angry enough?”

He grinned. “If I say yes, are you gunna take back the offer?”

She couldn’t help herself; she smiled at his teasing, and then sighed. “No. I’m going to do it. If nothing else, so poor Sebastian doesn’t have to read your writing.” He brought her palm to his lips again, and she felt his touch clear down to her toes.

“Thank you, Tessa.” A gentle tug, and she found herself leaning against him, her arms somehow wrapped around his middle. “Thank you for sharing in my dream. Thank you for sharing my life.”

He made her feel so *right*… so how to explain this nagging feeling that something was missing?



After the afternoon that she agreed to double-check the ranch’s ledgers out of pity, Cam spent almost every evening with Tess in his study. Sometimes Da joined them, but only when he had something he wanted to discuss. The older man preferred the privacy of his room, and that was fine with Cam, who wanted Tess all to himself. He’d hunch over the books at his desk while Tess put Jacob to sleep upstairs, and not really relax until she slipped into the study and took up her mending beside the grand leather chair by the cold hearth. He’d often quit his ponderous calculations then, and prop his boots up on the desk, and ask her about her day.

They’d talk about all sorts of things. He enjoyed hearing about

her childhood; it didn't seem especially *happy*, but it was interesting to hear about her father's life and stories. In return, he told her all about his younger years, growing up as part of a huge extended family, surrounded by resilient Highlanders. She seemed just as interested in his stories as he was in hers, and finally realized that she had no experience with a big family, and wanted to know all about it. Other times, he'd explain problems he was having on the ranch, or with the men, and she'd give him advice and opinions. Sometimes she was dead wrong in her approach—especially when it came to cowboy work—but she knew how to handle a business better than he did, and he would listen to her advice with an open mind. More often than not, he'd end up doing what she suggested.

One evening, he was struggling with numbers from his recent sale. Kelley and Sanderson had driven the contracted beef to Fort Laramie, and Colonel Gibbon had paid as arranged. The quartermaster up there knew that Open Skye beef was good meat, and jumped at the chance for more of it. Cam had written a letter to Gibbon with updates about his marriage, and hadn't been too surprised when Tess had penned three pages to Mrs. Gibbon and her children.

So Sanderson had returned with long letters and a wad of cash, which Cam couldn't balance out for the life of him. He found himself straining to hear Tess's light footsteps on the stairs as she returned, knowing everything would be *right* when she joined him. But when she did, he didn't let himself be distracted by the soft wave of femininity that followed her into the room. Instead, he narrowed his eyes and tried to figure out why he alternately had fifty-seven less dollars than he'd expected, or four extra head of cattle.

Finally, he dropped the pencil and growled in frustration. Tess put down her mending, or whatever it was she was bent over so industriously. It looked like one of Da's shirts. "What's wrong?"

Cam rubbed a hand over his eyes, and then stretched, groaning to feel the way sore muscles pulled across his shoulders. Sighing, he dropped his arms again. "I can't make this payment even out."

In a moment, she was standing behind him, looking over his shoulder. He wondered if she'd just been waiting to be asked, and felt his lips quirk into a rueful smile. He should have said something as soon as she came into the room. Then he felt her small, strong hands on his shoulders, and he stopped thinking altogether. Knotted muscles melted under her ministrations, and he groaned again. "God, Tessa…" The day's tensions faded as he focused on the pleasure and release her hands brought.

"You've misplaced a six somewhere… right there." He felt her bend over his right shoulder, and opened his eyes to see her pointing to an innocuous row of numbers halfway down the page. She turned a

proud smile on him, and he chuckled. Reaching around, he pulled her into his lap and burrowed his face in the crook of her neck.

"I should have just let you do it from the start."

"No, I was busy. But I'll double-check your numbers for you."

"Always, Tessa?"

"Always." It sounded like some kind of vow, and he wondered if she knew it.

She was an amazing woman, and he appreciated the way that she made his life so… *complete*. Her help, her support, and her kindness had filled his home with warmth and laughter. He liked the way she always seemed to know what he needed. He liked the way she could make him smile with a touch, a word. He liked the way his heart tightened when he looked at her.

Like? Hell, he was in love with the woman. She was everything he'd ever imagined in a wife, and she completed him.

"Tessa, I…" *love you*. Why was it so hard to say? Because he didn't know what she would say in return. She hadn't given him any inkling about her feelings towards him. She'd hinted at being grateful, and seemed to enjoy his company. Lord knew she liked his body, his touch. But as far as he could tell, that was as far as her feelings went. She hadn't mentioned love, and had been uncomfortable when he'd told her he was falling for her.

So he caught the words behind his teeth, and didn't tell her his real feelings. Did that make him a coward? Maybe.

"What?"

"Thank you."

"Of course!" She kissed him lightly on the forehead, and he had to smile then.

"You feel like checking the rest?"

"Sure."

And so, Cam spent his evening with his wife perched on his lap, going over his spidery handwritten calculations, catching his mistakes and making him chuckle with her observations. He was amazed how happy it made him… but something was missing.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



They were wrapped around one another. Her heartbeat was still racing from the way his touch had made her feel, the ecstasy he'd brought her to. He had rolled off of her, and taken her with him. Now his cheek was tucked against her shoulder, his lips resting against her neck. She felt his heavy breathing, and knew that he was struggling to regain control as well. She smiled, knowing he couldn't tell. It was empowering, knowing that she could bring such a mighty man down. She ran her fingers up his back and played with the curls at the base on his neck, and loved the way he shuddered at her touch.

Cam groaned lightly, and kissed her neck. "We have to stop doing this every night, Tessa. You're gunna kill me."

She laughed, and felt him move against her. "I don't recall this being my fault, husband. You're welcome to try to stay away."

She felt him smile against her skin. "You know I can't. I'm hooked on you, Tessa. I've fallen for you, sweetheart." She stiffened. "Hard."

Why did the thought of him being in love with her cause her to knot up inside? "Could you maybe try *not* to?"

He apparently didn't like the hesitation in her voice, or her response, because he sighed, and burrowed closer. "Too late, love."

She didn't respond, and he didn't say anything for the longest time. She thought he was asleep, there in her arms, until he yawned, and whispered again, "Too late."

She fell asleep wondering what was wrong with her, that she couldn't love him back.



What was wrong with him? How come Tess didn't feel the same way about him that he did about her? He wondered if he should stop mentioning his feelings to her. If she was never going to love him, then he shouldn't admit it to her. He didn't want to be completely humiliated.

But it was too late. Somewhere in the span of their short marriage, he'd fallen completely in love with her. He thought that he had been in love before, but knowing Tess, knowing what they shared, had made him realize that what he'd felt for Serena had been… *laughable*. It hadn't been love. It hadn't even been *close* to love. It had been a vague sense of desire; desire mostly for what she represented. But with Tess… with Tess it was different. He couldn't stop thinking about her, and when they were together, he couldn't stop himself from touching her. He loved the way she made him feel. He loved the way she was so serious all the time, and then could burst into laughter at the most surprising things. He loved her devotion to her son, and her growing devotion to his dream.

Yeah, he loved her alright, but he wasn't going to lay his heart open for her to wreck. It was hard enough to watch her close up, to turn away when he hinted at his feelings. He didn't know how he would feel if he told her the full truth and she changed the subject, or worse, dismissed his feelings.

A whistle cut through his musing, and he realized he'd been staring at the rear end of a longhorn for the last forty minutes. He pushed his hat back on his forehead, and scanned the rise. A horse and rider were picking their way towards him. As they got closer, he recognized Nate Barker. He and his brother owned the spread north of the Open Skye, and were good friends of his.

"Hey Cam. I was hoping to find you."

"Yeah?"

The younger man smiled slightly. "Yeah. Who'd you think mentioned to Kelley that these beeves needed moving?"

Cam chuckled. "I wondered where he'd got the idea. The kid means well, but he just can't seem to remember anything. When he said they were too far from the creek, I figured I'd better check it out myself."

"I thought so. I told Ash I'd check on how that fence is holding up west of here." Nate and Ash raised and trained horses—mainly broken mustangs—and sold them for a tidy profit. They let many of their animals run semi-wild on their fenced spread, and kept track of them 'til they were ready to be fully broken. Because the horses ran in herds, they'd started fencing in their land before Cam did. Now they shared some stretches of fence.

"Well, thanks. You were right. This group is stupid enough to suck mud when the creek's still flowing." Cam jerked his chin towards the dry streambed and rolled his eyes. "I'll push 'em west."

"Figured as much."

The two men sat in companionable silence for a minute, and then Nate swung down. "I've got a pretty filly I'm saving for you, you

know."

Cam laughed as he swung down as well. It felt good, after such somber thoughts. "And *you* know I can't afford another one of your horses. Thanks for the offer, though."

"She'll make a fine cutter."

With the fences up, there would be fewer round-ups, and thus less need for a horse specially trained to 'cut' cattle from the group. Still, a good cutter—especially one trained by the Barkers—could be priceless. It was tempting… "Alright, I'll take a look at her. But no promises."

Nate shrugged. "I'm not selling her to anyone else. Next time you visit, I'll point her out." He uncapped his canteen, and took a long swallow.

Wishing there was some shade nearby, Cam, stretched out his long legs in the dry Wyoming grass, and lay back, adjusting the brim of his hat to protect his eyes. "Sorry I haven't stopped by in a while. I keep meaning to."

"You've been busy, I hear." Nate joined him in the grass, pulling out a piece of jerky to chew on.

"Yeah? What have you heard?"

Around a mouthful, Nate replied. "That you got married." His drawl was familiar, and Cam could *hear* his friend's slow grin. "Molly's angry that you didn't mention it. She had to hear about it from Serena."

"Well, I've been busy."

Nate laughed then, and Cam smiled to hear it. The younger man had little to laugh about for the first part of his life; he'd been born with Indian blood in a time and place when Indians were despised. He'd fought and struggled until Ash Barker had taken him in and raised him as a brother. The two were inseparable, and had built a fine business together. When Ash had married Molly, almost seven years ago now, Nate had gladly accepted her and her sisters as part of his family. He was still the kind of man who didn't often share what he was feeling, but he couldn't disguise his good heart. "So? You gunna tell me about it? So I can at least tell Molly and the boys?"

"Not Ash? Don't you think *he* wants to hear how much I've screwed up my life?"

"I think Ash only cares that you're married, so he can commiserate when Molly's in a snit." Cam dipped his chin in acknowledgement. "So how'd you screw up? Serena said your bride is —and I'm quoting her here—'uncommonly beautiful'."

Cam had to smile then. "Yeah. Yeah, she is." He told his friend everything. About how he'd found her and Jacob, and how she'd attacked him first thing, and how he made her feel so *right* that he did

everything in his power to convince her marry him as soon as possible. About how well she was adapting to life on the Open Skye, and how much he liked having her around, and how she and Jacob were making his world a better place.

"All that, *and* she's beautiful?"

"She's the most stunning woman I've ever met. She doesn't realize it, though. She's half-Chinese, and has spent her life thinking that made her less…worthy. Less beautiful. But she's wrong." Nate didn't say anything, and Cam knew why; the younger man had spent his life feeling the same way, but he didn't have anyone to convince him otherwise.

Speaking of which… "How's Wendy?"

"*What*?" The question had taken Nate entirely off-guard, judging from the way his voice rose incredulously. Cam tried not to look smug. Nate's feelings for his sister-in-law's sister were no secret, at least not to Cam. The younger man had confessed years ago that Wendy—whom he'd met when she came to live with them after Molly's marriage—made him feel *complete*. They'd grown up together, and her decision to travel to St. Louis to teach school had been hard for her family to bear… but it'd devastated Nate. The fact that she hadn't come back yet, after more than two years, was tearing him up.

"Wendy. In St. Louis?" As if Nate could possible forget her. "How's she doing?"

The younger man turned away and mumbled something.

"What?"

"I said I don't know, alright?" He wouldn't meet Cam's gaze. "She stopped writing to me."

"Really?" Cam sat up. Once, when he'd mentioned Nate's feelings to Molly, the older woman's answer had confused him. *Nate's afraid he isn't good enough for her, but she feels the same about him*. It had seemed stupid to get so wrapped up inside because you didn't just sit down and talk it out, but Cam had admitted that he wasn't the first to give relationship advice, not by a long shot. Still, if Molly had been right, and Wendy cared for Nate, why had she stopped writing?

So he asked "Any idea why?" after he realized Nate wasn't going to elaborate.

"She still writes to Molly and the rest of the family. And Serena, of course."

"But not you."

From what he could see of Nate's profile, those high cheekbones looked gaunt, and his eyes hollow. Nate looked like a man who'd given up, who was struggling to let go.

"No." He finally whispered. He swallowed. "I figure she's met some slick city man who's wooing her like she deserves."

"Did she say anything about him to her sisters?"

"No. But her letters aren't the same. They're awkward, like she doesn't have anything to say to us anymore." He forced himself to shrug. "I guess we're part of her past."

Cam knew that the Murray sisters had grown up in Chicago, but he'd always thought they seemed happy here in Wyoming. It was possible, though, that Wendy had found a place in the city again.

There didn't seem anything to say, except, "I'm sorry."

Later, they'd turned the small herd westward towards the creek, and were heading to look at the fence Nate had mentioned, to see if it needed fixing. The younger man broke their companionable silence. "So… back before you got all into *my* personal business, you mentioned that you'd screwed up things with Tess. You wanna talk about that?"

"Nope." Cam softened his denial with a cheerful grin. "But fair's fair."

Nate's laugh was an ironic bark. "Yeah." His lips pulled into a tight smile. "So, how'd you screw up so bad?"

Taking a deep breath, Cam held it for a moment before letting it out in a great huff. "I went and fell in love with her."

After a moment's pause: "And that's a bad thing?"

"Only if she doesn't love me back."

"And does she?"

"Hell, I dunno, Nate." Cam pulled off his hat and swiped his forearm across his forehead before mashing the hat back down. "I haven't known her that long."

"She sounds pretty special, though."

Cam sighed. "Yeah, she is." Another deep breath. "And I *do* love her. I'm not about to tell her, though, and have her laugh at me."

"Because you don't think she loves you?"

"I keep hinting, and she told me outright to stop feeling that way. Sounds to me like she doesn't return the feeling, right?"

Nate sighed. "Yeah." Then, letting his horse pick her way up a little rise, he let loose another harsh bark of laughter. "Shoot, Cam. We're two of a kind, aren't we?"

"You mean both of us in love with women who won't love us back?"

"Who'd have thought it?"

Put like that, there really wasn't anything Cam could do but laugh with his friend. It wasn't pleasant laughter; there was more hopelessness than there ought to be. He knew that Nate didn't have a snowball's chance in hell of winning Wendy from some slick city dude. The younger man was good and honorable, and had always loved her, but the fact that she went off in the first place, and now

had stopped writing, meant that she didn't return his feelings.

But Tess… Cam was married to her, dammit. He wasn't going to give up on her yet. He had a lifetime to win her love. To convince her that he was worthy of it.

Worthy of her.

CHAPTER TWELVE



Molly Murray Barker jumped down off of the wagon, and then turned to pick up the carefully wrapped cake. She knew her sons—Noah was four, and Pete was six—wouldn't have any trouble climbing down themselves, and she left Annie to lift little Rose down. Her sister had always loved taking care of babies, but once the boys got older she'd lost interest. Molly knew Annie was thrilled to finally have a little girl to play with. Sure enough, she was soon cooing tonelessly to the baby.

With a final command to her sons to behave themselves, she climbed the steps up to the front porch of the MacLeod home. Of course, it had been the Selkirk home first, but Molly had never been particularly fond of Stanley Selkirk—a harsh, intimidating man—and knew that Serena hadn't wanted the land. When Sebastian offered to lend Cam the money to buy the ranch, she'd been thrilled. Cam had worked hard for so long, and finally had the chance to grasp his dreams.

And he was married! She just couldn't believe that! Well, she could believe that he was married—he was handsome and hard-working, a combination any young miss would like—but she couldn't believe he'd gotten married so *quickly*. Why, the Barkers hadn't even known about it until Serena and her aunts came to visit Annie. And after hearing about Nate's conversation with Cam, she became all the more determined to meet this new wife of his, this wife who refused to give her love away.

A few moments after her knock, the door was opened by the most exotic woman Molly had ever seen. Tess MacLeod—because of course it had to be her—was no taller than Annie, but at twenty-two, a woman grown. And just as Serena had said, she was absolutely beautiful, in a striking sort of way.

Noting the wary expression, Molly smiled cheerfully. "I am *so* sorry for dropping in unexpectedly like this, Tess, but once we found out Cam had married, I just *had* to come meet you. I'm Molly Barker."

Tess's dark eyes flicked to Annie holding the baby, and the two boys, and recognition dawned. "Of course." She stepped back to invite

them into the foyer. “Serena told me all about you. Cam promised we’d come visit, but things have been so busy lately…”

“No need to apologize! I just hope you don’t mind us dropping in like this. It was so exciting to hear that Cam found a wife, and then to hear all about you from Serena and Agnes and Agatha… well, I just couldn’t wait any longer.” The smaller woman didn’t respond to Molly’s enthusiasm. In fact, Molly didn’t think she’d ever met a more serious-looking person, for all of Tess’s beauty.

Tess led them into the parlor, and when Pete playfully shoved Noah, Molly glared them both into stillness. The room was as elegant as she’d remembered, but with Serena’s knick-knacks missing. Instead, the wing-back chairs bracketed a table with a stack of books, and there was a basket of mending on the floor. Some of the spots on the wall were bare, where Serena and her aunts had taken paintings to their home in Cheyenne, and the big clock on the far wall was gone as well. But Cam and his father had filled the room with a few of their own things, and Tess was making it feel even homier.

The biggest changes to the room, however, were the blocks and miniature soldiers spread around the floor. Pushing some out of the way with the side of her foot, Tess smiled tightly, apologetically. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t expecting company, and we’ve turned this room over to Jacob anyhow. He makes so many messes, but keeping a room formal just seemed silly…”

Tess trailed off when Molly put the cake down on a nearby table and took the smaller woman’s hand. Looking down into those surprised dark eyes, Molly said truthfully, “It’s the most wonderful thing I’ve seen all day, Tess. This room—this house—was too formal and too empty for Cam and Ian. You’ve brought life into it, and making it into a play room seems like an ideal solution.” She squeezed Tess’s hand and then dropped it. “Where is Jacob, anyhow?”

Surprise still evident in her expression, Tess gestured towards the settee, which Molly now saw had a blanket draped beneath it. “In his fort. He hid as soon as he heard the door.”

“Mrs. MacLeod?” Tess started at the sound, and turned to Pete, who was practically vibrating with anticipation. “Can me and Noah go look in the fort too?” Molly had seen the way her sons had eyed the wooden soldiers, and knew that they were dying to play with Jacob’s toys.

A small smile softened Tess’s features, and suddenly Molly understood her draw. She saw the allure in the exotic tilt of the eyes, and the creamy cheekbones. Just like she’d always thought her brother-in-law was a handsome man because of his mixed blood, she saw Tess’s sensual appeal.

“Of course.” Tess’s voice was huskier than it had been a

moment ago, and Molly was pleased to know that the smaller woman was showing them her true self. “I think that Jacob would be excited to meet you.”

She crossed to the settee, and gestured the two boys towards her. Bending down, she lifted the blanket just enough for Molly to see a mop of light brown curls. “Jacob, two friends came to visit. Can they bring some soldier men into the fort?”

“Yah! Ho-sies too!”

Pete had already scooped up two wooden horses, and Noah had a handful of soldiers. Tess backed away and Molly’s sons dropped to their bellies and wiggled underneath the settee. Their rear ends and legs stuck out, of course, but they were soon chattering happily about the battles being waged.

Tess excused herself, and returned within minutes with a tray and three cups of tea. Molly was impressed that she’d fixed them so quickly, and when she commented on it, Tess looked embarrassed. “My father always said that tea was essential to a person’s well-being. He always had water boiling for a cup, and I guess old habits…”

Remembering that Nate said Tess’s father had been Chinese, Molly smiled understandingly. But she could tell that the smaller woman didn’t want to talk about her family. So, taking Rose from Annie and setting the baby on the floor to chew on a block, Molly began to tell Tess about her family and her home. Soon, Cam’s wife’s shoulders relaxed, and she even smiled as she sipped her tea.

When Rose crawled towards her, Tess moved the empty teacup aside and scooped the little girl. Bouncing her on one knee, Tess cooed “Aren’t you a pretty girl?” Rose grinned, drool pooling behind her two bottom teeth, and Molly felt her heart melt as it always did. Tess quickly mopped up the baby spit, and the two women fell to talking about babies and children, and soon began to grow quite comfortable with one another.

Molly watched Tess watch Annie, and saw the way the girl’s eyes were riveted to the women’s lips. Annie hadn’t been born deaf, but lost her hearing at a young age. That fact, combined with Sebastian’s oralist teachings, meant that with practice, Annie was able to read lips, and even speak herself. She still preferred the sign ‘language’ that Wendy had developed, but she gamely kept up with the lip-reading. The thought of Wendy caused Molly a pang, as it always did. She hadn’t seen her middle sister in over two years, and missed her terribly. Her letters had lately turned formal and scarce, and Molly feared for the younger women, alone in a big city. Wendy would have loved meeting Tess, to hear about the other woman’s adventures.

Wanting to hear them herself, but not wanting to overwhelm

Tess, Molly instead drew Annie into the conversation, and appreciated the way Tess tried to speak to the girl. It was obvious she had no experience with deaf people, but she spoke clearly and politely to Annie, and earned Molly's respect. Many people spoke louder, or spoke to Molly and expected her to 'translate' for her sister. By acknowledging Annie's abilities to communicate, Tess showed that she was thoughtful and insightful. And she was obviously very kind, despite how reserved she'd seemed at first. She won the girl's favor when she complimented Rose's little dress, and seemed impressed—rather than surprised—when Annie admitted that she loved to sew.

"The stitching is so delicate! You have a real talent, Annie!"

Molly's sister blushed. "Thak oo."

"Beautiful stitches, and you're good with children. You are an accomplished young women."

"And she has a special touch with the foals." Molly couldn't pass up the chance to brag about her sister. "Ash turned all the care for them over to her." Tess raised her brows, impressed. "Of course, the last year has been more schoolwork with Serena and Sebastian, and less baby horses, but still…"

"I miss dem."

"I can imagine—" Whatever Tess was going to say was lost when the boys tumbled out from their fort, and soon were rolling around the floor like little puppies. Molly started to chastise her sons, but held back in favor of seeing how Tess would handle the situation. The younger woman just shifted in her chair to move a small table out of the way of the flailing arms, and then sat back to cuddle Rose. Molly liked that she wasn't uptight about the boys playing in her space. Serena, for all of her generosity and love of children, would have been concerned for her beautiful things. Tess was down-to-earth and practical, and Molly couldn't help but like that about her.

"I can tell that you're a wonderful mother, Tess." When the smaller woman looked startled, Molly asked, "What?"

"Nothing." Tess smiled, and it transformed her face. "It's just that Cam said something very similar to me right after we were married."

"Well, he's always had sound sense. For years I've watched him watch the boys, and now Rose," she nodded to her daughter, who was now trying to climb Tess's face, "and known that he'd be a wonderful father. He's wanted a family for a long while, but I think he's only recently realized it."

Tess laughed as the baby tried to suck on her chin. "Yes, he said the same thing to me. He's good with Jacob."

"Jacob me!" Her son, who was holding his own against the big boys, pointed to himself and looked inquisitively at his mother.

"Yes, honey. I'm just talking about Daddy." Molly glanced at Annie while their hostess's attention was taken by her son. *Daddy?* Annie mouthed with a raised eyebrow. Molly smiled and nodded slightly, thrilled that Cam and Tess had realized how important it'd be for Jacob to consider Cam his father. In fact, now that she was able to see the boy fully, she realized that he could pass as Cam's child. Jacob obviously didn't have much of his grandfather's Chinese blood; there was a slight tilt around the eyes, and high cheekbones, but his eyes were more blue than dark, and his hair was a brown that might almost appear blonde if he spent enough time in the sun. Tess's first husband must have had curly blonde hair like Cam.

"I'm sorry that you had to lose your first husband, and go through such an ordeal as raising Jacob alone," Molly reached to take Rose as the baby tried to climb down herself, "But we're so glad that you're here with us now. With Cam."

Was Tess blushing? It was hard to tell. "I'm happy to be here. The last years have been hard, and it's nice to finally have a place to call home."

"I know nothing can replace your first husband. You must miss him very much."

Now she looked down at her hands, clasped on her lap. "Joshua and I were friends from childhood. He was an orphan, and spent time working for my father when we were both young. After my parents' deaths, he proposed, but it was… well, it was almost a business arrangement. We were a good match, and worked well together. We trusted each other to know what was needed to run a store."

"Well, friendship is a good way to start a marriage, I guess. It can grow into love."

"Perhaps." Tess's mumble and intense interest in the boys' play finally made Molly understand. Tess hadn't loved her first husband. Why? Was she the sort of woman who was incapable of giving love? Or had he just been unworthy of her love? Or had she only felt companionship for him? Is that why she was uncomfortable with Cam's feelings for her?

After an awkward minute or two, Molly asked, "How did he die?"

Tess answered quickly, as if she'd been looking to change the subject as well. "A spotted fever that the men in the logging camps were getting. Someone told me it was from an insect bite. He wouldn't let me sell to the loggers that summer… so he caught it, not me."

"I'm sorry." Annie clucked, and took Rose from Molly. "I know it must have been hard to lose him, to be alone with a baby on the way. To know that he wouldn't be there to meet Jacob…" Molly had to blink away tears. The thought of losing her husband was horrifying,

but the thought of her children losing their daddy was just… well, she couldn't bear it.

But Tess smiled tightly. "Joshua wasn't interested in children. He was actually terrified when I found out I was pregnant."

"He sounds very different from Cam."

"Oh, he was." And in that moment, seeing the way Tess's eyes softened and her lips parted at her husband's name, Molly wasn't so sure that Cam was right. It seemed to her that Tess *was* very much in love with him. She wondered if the younger woman realized it.

"Peteh!" Annie's tone turned her sister's head. The girl was glaring at her nephews, who—along with Jacob—were gathered around the cake. Judging from her eldest's guilty expression and the finger in his mouth, he'd been nominated to try the icing. "Dat's foh desset."

Molly smiled apologetically at Tess. "I'm sorry. I guess the draw was too much."

"Don't be silly." Tess smiled in response. "I've been eyeing that cake since you brought it in. If Pete didn't try it, I know Jacob would… or I would have!" They both laughed, and their hostess continued. "Will you stay for lunch?"

Molly hesitated. It really was bad manners to show up uninvited, and to expect their hostess to feed them too. But she desperately wanted to stay and learn more about her new neighbor, to get to know her better… "We don't want to impose. We packed a little picnic, and can—"

"No need! We have plenty. It won't be a fancy fare, but Ian has been giving me pointers on feeding a small army, with all of these cowboys. So a few extra mouths at luncheon won't be a problem at all."

Leaving the boys in the parlor with an admonition to be careful with Jacob, the womenfolk followed Tess to the large kitchen behind the dining room. Their hostess seemed pleased to show off the kitchen, and Molly assumed it meant that Tess had only recently become comfortable in the space. Molly herself was an accomplished cook and baker, at one time hoping to open her on bake-shop. So while her own kitchen was her favorite part of her house, she enjoyed helping others cook.

Tess handed Rosie two wooden spoons, and the baby happily sat in the middle of the floor and started hitting things. Annie and Molly helped Tess prepare platters of sliced beef sandwiches and cold salads. The more time Molly spent with their hostess, the more she liked the smaller woman. Tess MacLeod was practical and no-nonsense, but also kind and thoughtful. And she smiled whenever she spoke about Cam, which told Molly that she cared for her husband. So

why did Cam think that Tess couldn't give him her love? Had Nate misunderstood? Molly was honest enough to realize that she was poking her nose into something that didn't concern her, after getting third-hand information. But she couldn't help it; she wanted Cam to be happy, and having a loving wife would make him *very* happy.

She needed to see the couple together before she could make any further assumptions. *What's keeping Nate?*



Nate couldn't decide if he was ticked off at his sister-in-law or not. Oh, it'd been a clever ambush, alright. She'd waited until he'd stuffed his cheeks full of her amazing flapjacks before springing the news: "You'd better hurry to finish your chores. We're leaving in two hours."

"Mwa?"

"You're taking Annie and the children and me over to the Open Skye to meet Tess MacLeod."

"Mmmaaaghaa?"

Molly had smiled smugly and slid another flapjack onto his plate, and Nate had known he'd lost. "Ash can't go, because *my darling husband*—" he'd heard the sarcastic bite "—said he had too much to do today. But he said that *you* didn't have anything that couldn't be put off."

Nate sighed then, and swallowed. "Why do you need an escort, Molls? Pete's old enough to drive the team, with your help."

"Because I need you to find Cam, and bring him back to the house." Nate had learned how to keep his face still, from watching his impassive older brother. Still, he raised one brow now. His sister-in-law shooed her younger son away from the counter, and poured Nate a cup of coffee, which he accepted with a nod. "What you said about their marriage—Cam and Tess's—just doesn't seem right. I want to see them together."

"I just told you what he said."

"But maybe he's wrong."

"Seems like you're meddling, Molls."

"Of course I'm meddling." She'd ruffled his hair then, like she'd done when he was younger, and he'd sighed again. He would do anything for this sister-in-law of his, who'd brought light to their lives and happiness to his brother. If all she wanted was a little help in her meddling, then Nate could spend a day with his neighbor. Besides, it seemed that Ash had sacrificed him to Molly's good intentions already.

So he'd finished breakfast and left instructions for their latest

hired hand, and ridden with Molly and Annie and the kids to MacLeod land. Tipping his hat in farewell, he'd started looking for Cam in the likely places. A whole day to himself, with no urgent business, and the chance to see a friend? Nah, Nate decided he couldn't be too irritated with Molly. Besides, if she learned whatever she needed, maybe she could meddle her way into making Cam happy. Like he deserved.

Cam was kneeling in the dust beside a calf when Nate found him. He looked up, nodded his hello, and said only, "Get down here, would you? I need help holding him." As Nate swung down, he saw that the animal's back leg was twisted. A break would mean the loss of the cow, but it looked like Cam was intent on straightening the limb. Nate lay on top of the calf while Cam pulled and twisted. When they were finished, he helped his neighbor lift the animal up over his horse's haunches.

"Thanks." Cam ran his sleeve across his forehead, and then took a long swig from his canteen. "So, why'd you show up just when I needed help?"

"Dumb luck." Nate hesitated, and then decided on honesty. "Molly sent me to bring you home."

He was taken aback by Cam's immediate reaction. The older man shoved the cap back on the canteen, and took a step towards Nate. His jaw had slackened, and Nate saw fear in those green eyes. "What is it? Is everyone alright? Oh God, Tess?" Nate shook his head, and thought he saw Cam relax, before the other man continued, "Jacob, Da? Your family?"

It was telling, Nate thought, that Cam's first thought—worry—was for his wife, and then his stepson. He was remembering what his friend had told him the last time they'd met on the range; Cam MacLeod sounded like a man in love with his wife.

"Everyone's fine." The tension eased across Cam's shoulders, and the haunted look faded. "Molly decided she wanted to visit today, and she sent me to tell you to come see her."

"Why?"

Nate shrugged, not quite sure how to explain that his sister-in-law planned to meddle. "Guess she wants to see your ugly mug."

Cam smiled then. "Well, who wouldn't?" He secured the calf and then swung up into the saddle. Before turning his sorrel—one Nate himself had bred, and his brother had trained—Cam whistled at the small group of cattle grazing nearby. "Don't worry mama." Nate had never been a cowboy, and all of the cattle looked the same to him. "If he gets better, I'll send him back out to you." As Nate swung up onto his own horse, he heard the other man mutter, "And if he doesn't, we'll enjoy him."

They rode back towards the ranch house and the womenfolk,

and Nate made small talk with his friend. Cam wasn't any good at hiding his emotions. Everything he felt and thought showed up on that big honest face. He was usually smiling, but he seemed even livelier than usual today. Nate wondered if it was the marriage that had changed him. Lord knew that women were enough trouble without trying to figure out what they were thinking… but Cam seemed to be coping well enough.

For his friend's sake, Nate hoped that Tess could be convinced to love Cam. Nate had seen the transformation in his own brother, years ago, when he'd realized that he loved Molly. Ash had been miserable until he'd confessed his feelings to his new wife, and found out that she'd been carrying a torch for him too. The two of them had been almost impossible to live with after that, with all of the kissing and loving looks. But they'd been happy, and Nate hoped Cam got to experience that. Soon.

For his part, Nate would swallow his feelings and be happy for Cam, who deserved his wife's love. Nate knew that he'd lost the only chance at love—at happiness—when Wendy stopped thinking of him as a friend. He missed her, and missed being able to talk to her all the time. But most importantly, he missed knowing that she trusted him and relied on him. It was hard enough to cope when she moved to St. Louis, but he respected and understood her decision. But when she'd stopped writing to him, stopped sharing her secrets and thoughts and gossip… that's when he knew real loneliness. He just prayed that whatever slick city beau had scooped her up realized what a treasure he'd stolen. Nate alternated between wishing her happiness with her mysterious suitor, and wanting to travel to St. Louis to put a fist through the man's face.

And so both Nate and Cam avoided the subject of women in general, as they rode back towards the house. They were so different —one big and blonde, one dark and lithe—with such different prospects and outlooks; but they were friends for all of that. Nate saw his friend's open, friendly face crinkle into a smile as they passed the ranch's front drive, and wondered what it must be like to show feelings so easily. But for all of their differences, he trusted Cam like a brother, and hoped for the best for his friend.

They didn't make it to the house in time for lunch, but after leaving the calf in Smitty's care, they were served a late meal by the womenfolk. It was nice to be fussed over, and he watched the way Tess made sure Cam was satisfied. Afterwards, holding his niece while she slept, Nate noticed the smile Cam's wife offered only to the other man, and wondered how much truth there was to Cam's worries.

Tess's son was cute—not as cute as his niece and nephews, but close—and not as exotic as she looked. Nate saw beauty in her that

might be passed over by someone else. Someone bigoted or racist, maybe, but he was used to that. He only had one Indian grandparent—and he didn't even know which tribe—but it'd been Nate's bad luck to inherit the dark hair and dark features that marked him as an undesirable. Maybe it was his own mixed blood that made him look at Tess and see a fine-looking woman, but judging from Cam's description of her, she affected other men too. She was serious and watchful, until her husband or son or Molly made her chuckle, and then her whole face lit up and Nate really understood her appeal. Her hand rested on Cam's shoulder, making small circles against his shirt, and Nate doubted she even realized what she was doing.

When Cam brought her fingers to his lips for a gentle kiss, she turned a look on him that was full of… well, if Nate had to guess, he'd say love. It was full of hope and affection and kindness and tolerance and acceptance, and if *that* wasn't love, then Nate didn't know what was.

He exchanged a glance with his sister-in-law, and judging from her smirk, she'd seen it too. Later, when he'd finally shooed his nephews out the door, Molly lingered on the porch. She'd handed the baby to Tess, to hand up to Annie, and then touched Cam's sleeve.

Molly's smile was smug when she said quietly, "You're wrong, Cameron MacLeod."

As his confused look, she lifted herself on her toes, and whispered into his ear, so low that Nate—who was busy eavesdropping—had trouble hearing it: "She does love you. She just doesn't know it yet."

For his friend's sake, Nate hoped Molly was right. And later, when he shook Cam's hand goodbye, he noticed something in the other man's eyes that hadn't been there earlier: hope.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



September turned to October, and the days grew cooler as well as shorter. Tess had long ago settled into a comfortable routine on the Open Skye. She knew how the ranch operated now, knew what was needed of her to make her husband's life easier. She came to know the four cowboys who worked the ranch, and her relationship with Ian grew closer too. She found joy in the way Jacob was growing and learning and changing every day. For the first time since her parents' death, she felt like she had a place to call her own. She had a real home.

But there was an empty feeling, too. Something was missing. Something wasn't quite right, and no matter how hard Tess worked, no matter how much she learned, no matter how comfortable she felt on the Open Skye, she couldn't deny that she wasn't completely at ease.

It had to do with her husband, she knew. Cam was just as gentle, just as kind and teasing and open as ever. But he hadn't again mentioned his feelings for her, not after she'd asked him to try to stop "falling" for her. Oh, he would look at her with affection, and something else, sometimes. And sometimes, when she was lying in his arms after they'd made love, he'd start to say something, and then catch himself. She wondered what she would do if he said those words again. She wondered how she felt about her husband.

Tess admired him, certainly. And she cared for his happiness and comfort. She looked forward to a long lifetime of his teasing and his touch and the way he tried to guess what she was thinking. She appreciated the way that he was helping to raise Jacob to be a good boy. In fact, her feelings towards him weren't complicated at all; she liked him, and liked being married to him. Was that what love was all about?

Maybe she would have found out, if he ever brought up the subject again. Perhaps, had he said the words to her first, she would have responded. But it seemed that he'd followed her request, and had stopped falling for her… so she swallowed whatever confusion she had about her feelings for him, and got on with her life.

In mid-October, Kelley brought home a cold. Thank *God* it wasn't the influenza, but the boy was miserable for a week. He passed it on to Perkins, Smitty and Ian. The two cowboys recovered easily enough with rest and hot fluids, but the older man had a harder time of it. Cam was worried about his father, of course, but couldn't take time off from the important business of preparing the ranch for winter to tend to the older man. Tess willingly took the job, and spent a week and a half bullying, cajoling and sweet-talking Ian into recovery. He reverted back to his grumpy state; nothing she did for him was good enough, to hear him complain. But she knew it was just a reaction to being stuck in bed when there was work to be done, so Tess endured it all with a somewhat-strained good humor.

That didn't mean she didn't complain to her husband. Cam didn't offer any explanations or solutions for his father's actions. He just sat back and let her rant in the privacy of their room, and that made Tess feel better. After, he wrapped her in his arms and kissed the top of her head and said "Thank you, Tessa, for putting up with him. I know it's not easy to deal with a grumpy old man and a little boy and the rest of us."

She sighed then, because appreciation, acknowledgement, was really all she needed.

And then she sneezed. By morning she couldn't get out of bed; she ached all over and her head was stuffed and pounding. It had been only a matter of time before she caught Ian's cold, she supposed. She tried to get up to make breakfast, but with a grin, Cam pushed her back down on the pillows. "You've cared for everyone else for long enough. Now we'll take care of you."

"But Da needs…"

"Da is better. You said so yourself yesterday. I just checked, and he's not even in his room. Probably escaped early this morning, to get away from your fussing." Tess felt too miserable to smile at his teasing. "So just go back to sleep. I'll fix you some tea."

She wanted to protest that she could make her own tea—her husband much preferred coffee, and his tea-making skills left much to be desired—but she sneezed instead. He handed her a handkerchief, tucked the covers around her, and kissed her on her forehead. "Rest."

Tess didn't intend to go rest, not when there was so much to do. But the bed was *so* comfortable, and her back ached *so* much, that she thought that she might lay there for a few minutes more. Before he closed the door, she called out weakly, "Don't let Jacob in here!" She'd done a good job of keeping him and Ian apart for the last week, which had been hard since they had become close. But she didn't want her son to catch this nasty cold.

"Don't worry, Tessa." She could hear the smile in his voice, but

it hurt too much to open her eyes again. “We’ll take care of things.”

She almost snorted at that, knowing he was laughing at her for wanting to do more work, but she didn’t have the strength. Visions of Cam trying to cook breakfast flashed through her head… and then she was asleep again.

With all the sleeping she did, her recovery was faster than her father-in-law’s. She was feeling better the next day, and back to her old self within a few days. Which was good, because Cam had his hands full with a grumpy father, a sick wife, and a fussy little boy. It took Tess most of the fourth day to realize that despite her efforts to keep Jacob from being exposed, he’d caught the cold somehow.

By that evening, he was miserable, and Tess was miserable too. She’d only just recovered herself, and was standing over the stove weakly stirring the stew. Jacob was sitting in the middle of the kitchen floor with his blankie and every single one of his toys, making cooking that much more difficult. Her patience had run out, she still felt like a limp rag, and she couldn’t stand to see her son so fussy.

Into the middle of this walked Cam, equally tired from so many days of hard work and caring for his family. But his smile was still warm, and made Tess feel cherished. He dropped a kiss to her head, and she snuggled into his arms, happy to lean on his strength, even for a moment. She loved the way he smelled; horses and hay and sweat and warmth. In his arms, she felt safe.

Jacob chose that moment to start whining again, nothing specific, just because he felt crummy. She sighed, and turned in her husband’s arms to look at her son. The poor little guy looked so unhappy, like he wasn’t able to understand why his nose was so plugged up. She slipped out of Cam’s arm and picked Jacob up off the floor.

Immediately, the little boy started screaming. She tried hushing and rocking him, but that just made him scream more, and kick and struggle. She had to actually sit down, because his tantrum was so violent and she was so weak.

Her last nerve snapped. “What is it? *Jacob*!” His screaming subsided to whimpers, but she didn’t comfort him, for fear of him struggling again. “What’s wrong, honey? Do you need hugs? Are you hungry?” She watched tears streaming down his cheeks as he turned to Cam with his arms outstretched.

“*Want Daddy!*”

Cam’s expression could only be described as stricken. But he hurried over and picked up the boy. Soon Jacob was sniffling against his father’s shoulder, and Cam was patting his back while he paced. But he didn’t lose that vaguely shocked look.

“Cam?”

It took him a moment before he turned back to her, and she watched him swallow and glance down at the little head of curls. It occurred to her for the first time that Joshua's hair had been curly and light, just like Cam's. The similarities between her first husband and her second ended there, but it was nice that Jacob looked a bit like Cam.

"He's never called me 'Daddy' before." Cam's awed whisper reached down into her stomach and squeezed.

"We call you Daddy all the time."

"You do." He rubbed one cheek against Jacob's soft hair. "Jake's *never* called me that before."

She wanted to ask him if he minded, but seeing the look of wonder and… and something else in those gorgeous green eyes made her realize that he didn't. She heaved herself out of the chair and crossed to them, tucking herself into the crook of his other arm and rubbing Jacob's back gently.

In that moment, she knew that *this* was what marriage was all about. It was having a hard day, and still being expected to care for a sick child, and knowing that she could rely on her partner to take some of the burden off of her. It was trust, and mutual benefit, and making sure that the other person was happy. It was knowing that her husband cared for her son as much as she did, and knowing that he appreciated her contributions to his dream.

Later, he made sweet love to her, and she was amazed again by his gentleness. Such a strong man, almost twice her size, and she remembered the violence he meted out to Willis and Crowley. But when they were together, he touched her as softly as a feather. Tonight, his touch made her weep, and she didn't know why. But he held her after, and rubbed her back, and it felt like home. She sighed against his skin, listening to his heartbeat.

"I love you, Tessa."

Her breath caught. Those were the words she'd been dreading; the words that acknowledged feelings for her that she couldn't return. He said 'love' so casually, but she couldn't even begin to understand the word. She didn't want to hurt him, but she couldn't give him the words he deserved to hear. Tears gathered in her eyes once more, but she willed them away, not wanting him to see them.

A long minute passed before he sighed and squeezed her tightly. "I love you, Tessa MacLeod, and I'm not going to stop." His pause seemed hopeful, but she kept her lips pressed firmly together. "And do you know what, sweetheart? I think that you love me too." Another pause, but this time she felt her heart sink. How to tell him he was wrong? How to tell him that she didn't even know what that kind of love *was*, much less feel it for him? "I think that you love me

too…you just don't know it yet. And I want you to know that I understand. I'm willing to wait 'til you figure it out."

The tears fell then. Tess didn't know why she was so emotional today, or why she could cry when she was *sure* she didn't love her husband. After all, love wasn't necessary for a comfortable life, and she was always practical. Love or not, she obviously felt comfortable enough with him to cry, because he just kissed the top of her head and held her… again. Soon she'd sniffled herself into a quiet mess, and he rolled over and tucked her against him. She liked the way he was large enough to curl around her, her bottom pressed up against his lap and her head under his chin. She felt safe, protected… cherished.

His arm was the size of one of her legs, but despite that, it didn't feel heavy when it snaked around her and pulled her close. She sighed then, and heard him echo it. Her father had been gentle and teasing, despite being raised to believe that men had to be firm and stoic. Besides *Baba*, Cam was the best man she'd ever met; he was somehow big and strong and gentle and caring and teasing all at once.

So how come she couldn't love him? And why wasn't it enough for him that she liked the way he made her feel, and wanted to make him happy? *I think that you love me too.* What if he was right? How could he know that? She fell asleep wondering if he could know her heart better than she herself did.

When she rolled over—she noticed she'd been waking up more frequently lately—Cam wasn't there. She reached for him, but it wasn't like the bed was so large that she'd miss him. He slept diagonally across it, as it was. He simply wasn't there with her.

It'd never happened before, and was enough to cause her to sit up in alarm. She couldn't tell what time it was, but there was still moonlight filtering through the curtains. Slipping out of bed, she wrapped her silk robe—a gift from her father a lifetime ago—around herself, and checked the hallway. The house seemed silent, except for a slight hum drifting down the hall. Silently she followed, noticing a faint light from Jacob's room.

She was careful not to make any sound, concerned that her son might see her and make a fuss. But she needed to check that he was okay, since he'd been feeling so poorly. She leaned forward, ever so slightly, to be able to peer around the doorway.

Cam was there, already, stretched out in the comfy chair with her son on his chest. His long legs, encased in jeans he must have pulled on when he'd left the room, were propped up on the stool. Jacob was curled against the light hair on Cam's chest—the chest Tess knew so well—snuggling with his blankie and sniffling pitifully. Cam had one large hand against the boy's back, and was singing to him. Actually *singing* to him. He could carry a tune much better than she

could, and was softly singing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star,” one of Jacob’s favorites.

He finished, and the little boy stirred restlessly. So he began to sing a lullaby she’d never heard before, with enough of a burr in his voice to tell her that it must have been a childhood favorite. *“Hush, hush, time to be sleeping. Hush, hush, dreams come a-creeping, dreams of peace and of freedom. So smile in your sleep, bonny baby.”* He had nice singing voice, gruff but calming, and Jacob yawned hugely.

In that moment, she knew contentment. Watching her husband cradle her son, watching such gentleness from a giant of a man, she knew that she was where she belonged. It took a remarkable man to work a full day, then care for his sick family, and comfort his stubborn wife, and get up at all hours with an ill step-son. A man who’d been stricken just by a little boy calling him “Daddy.” Yes, Cam MacLeod was a remarkable man, one who deserved a wife who loved him.

As she backed down the hall, careful to not make a noise to alert him, she wondered why she couldn’t.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Cam shuddered as she squeezed around him, and then, unable to hold back any longer, spilled his seed into her womb with a grunt. She collapsed against him, her hair pooling like black honey over his chest. Normally spent after making love to her, tonight he felt invigorated. Arms splayed out on either side, he listened to his own heartbeat and marveled at his new life.

It was late October, which was his favorite time of year. It wasn't God-awful hot anymore, but the snow hadn't started either. The cattle were less active, and he and his hands were finishing up preparing for winter. They'd cut back on the hay-harvesting last year when he'd started selling off cattle; fewer animals meant less need for stock-piled food, and with more land they had plenty of rich Wyoming grass at their disposal, even in the dead of winter.

This time of year it was still clear and dry enough to ride across the range, but there was less to occupy his time. He found himself thinking of his wife more frequently. They'd been married well over two months now, and he couldn't figure out how she felt about their marriage. Although she seemed to genuinely care about his comfort, to worry about him, and to enjoy his company, she still stubbornly refused to give him her love. Why? Molly's visit—and her words—was the only thing that kept Cam hopeful. She'd insisted that Tess loved him, but just didn't know it yet. He clung to those words, and convinced himself that *why else* would Tess be so obviously content in her life? But then he would start to wonder why it was taking her so long to figure it out, and he'd go off doubting again.

Unable to help himself, he repeated the ritual that frustrated him so much, in the hopes that tonight would be different. "I love you, Tessa."

Tonight, she just sighed against his chest, and he shifted slightly, freeing her to curl up against his shoulder. He liked the way they fit, the way she was able to accommodate him, and how he could hold her so easily. They'd repeated this scene so many times that it almost didn't hurt when she refused to answer him, refused to give him her love. After every time they made love—and they had made

love every night—he'd tell her those words, and she'd refuse to answer or acknowledge them. He felt like a martyr, doomed to repeat —

His eyes slammed open as his reasoning caught up with his thoughts. He loved her, yeah, and he'd told her so at least once a day since she'd been so sick. But more importantly, he had made love to her. He'd made love to her every night since their wedding night, except for those days she'd been ill, and even then she'd slept naked beside him. He had three sisters; he knew enough about women to know what that meant. Either something was really wrong with her, or… his hand crept over to her stomach, and she nuzzled closer to him. Or she was pregnant.

"Tessa?"

"I'm sorry, Cam."

Her apology sidetracked him. "Sorry about what?"

"Sorry that I can't give you what you want." She inhaled deeply, shudderingly. "What you deserve."

He smiled then, sure that not only *had* she given him what he wanted—a family—but that she *did* love him. She cared enough to be sorry that she didn't care more. Rolling, he wrapped his arms around her, and could tell that she was disconcerted by his intensity.

"Tessa, when was the last time you had your courses?"

If he'd thought to shock her, he'd succeeded. She was obviously still feeling guilty about his earlier confession, and hadn't been expecting anything so intimate. She pushed away from him, cocking herself on one elbow to peer at him. When she saw that he was being serious, she tucked her feet under her bottom and sat up. Her brows were dipped over those enigmatic dark eyes, and her lips were pursed, the only indication of her confusion.

He didn't say anything, still reeling from the implications. Finally she broke the silence. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I'm just wondering. We've… been intimate every night since that first time. So I don't know if you're usually regular, or if you're pregnant." The candle gave enough light to see her expression change to comprehension to contemplative to wonder. He smiled again, then.

Her hand stole to her belly then, still flat. Her breasts were a little fuller, though, although not so much that he'd noticed before now. "I'm not…" and for a moment Cam's stomach dropped, wondering if his assumption had been wrong. "But you're right…" she took a deep breath. "I'm pregnant."

"You're sure?"

"Another month would tell for sure, but this is how I felt with Jacob. I just didn't… I didn't realize."

"How *do* you feel?"

"Tired all the time. Needlessly emotional." Cam chuckled. From his serious wife, that *was* odd. "More tender."

A full-out laugh then, and when she cast a confused glance his way, he laughed harder and reached for her, pulling her down on his chest. She was going to have his baby. They were going to have a baby. Together.

"Cam?"

"I'm just…" He buried his face in her hair and smiled again. "I've been waiting for a family for so long, and now I have one."

"You're going to be a daddy."

"No," He pulled back and looked up at her. "I'm a daddy now. Jake says so." She smiled then, and he was glad she was happy. "I've been hoping for this, Tessa. Jake's going to be a big brother!"

One small hand cupped his cheek, running fingers through the stubble of his beard. He shivered at her touch. "I can't believe it."

"I can." His smile didn't stop him from capturing her questing hand and planting kisses on her palm. "I've been working hard every night." She tried to pull away, but he knew her well enough to know that she wasn't really angry. "I just hope she's as beautiful and even-tempered as you are."

Tess blushed then. "You think I'm…?"

Tugging slightly, he brought her lips down to his for a gentle kiss. "How could you even doubt that?" He whispered against her skin. "I think you're amazing. I love you, Tessa, and I don't mean to ruin this, so I won't tell you again," he hurried to say when she stiffened. "I just wanted you to know."

She swallowed. "You said 'her'? Don't all men want a son?"

Lord, sometimes she just needed reassurance, didn't she? "I've got a son already. Jake needs a little sister. I want someone pretty and sweet and kissable." He planted another one on her. "Like her mother."

Tess's hand moved to her belly again. "Another baby."

"Are you okay with this? I mean, I figured you knew what to expect…?"

Another one of her true smiles, the one that lit up her face. "I know. I shouldn't have been surprised, but I was just so wrapped up in…" she trailed off, and then glanced at him. "For so long, it's just been me and Jacob. Then we found a place here with you. I…" She took a deep breath. "I'm terrified, but I'm excited too."

She grabbed his hand, then, placing it over her belly. "Cam." Her entire face lit up, her joy enough to bring tears to his eyes. "We're going to have a baby!"

He knew then, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that she loved him,

even if she didn't know. Even if she was never able to tell him those three words, he knew. He vowed to cherish the memory of this moment until his dying day.

The moment he found out that they were going to have a baby, and the moment that he finally saw her love for him.



Despite their best intentions, they weren't able to keep their news a secret for very long. Tess was serving Ian his porridge—or "po-wige", as Jacob called it with a turned-up nose—when the older man grabbed her wrist. "What's got ye so bubbly this mornin'?"

She blushed and tried to twist her arm free, but he pulled her closer to him, peering up into her face. "Don't try to lie, girl, ye're terrible at it. Ye've been humming since ye poured me coffee." Tess opened her mouth to protest that it was a lovely day, and that's why she was in such a good mood, when he cut her off again. "An' ye didn't even mind when Jacob poured his porridge on the table. *And* ye're still smilin', even though ye want to argue."

"I don't know what you mean." Tess tried to hide her smile, but wasn't successful. Her father-in-law snorted.

"See? Terrible." He took a bite, and then reached for the honey to sweeten it. "Fine, don't tell me. I mean, it's not like I matter or anything…"

He looked so disgruntled that a little giggle slipped out, and he looked up in surprise. "Ye're *laughing* now?" She lifted her hand to her mouth and turned away. "Lord help us, what's wrong?"

"What's wrong with who?" Cam slammed the back door, stomping dirt from his boots and pulling off his jacket.

"Yer wife's havin' a fit or something. Never seen her so cheerful." Cam's worried look eased into a smile, which soon slipped into a proud grin. "Good God—ye're doin' it too!"

"Daddy!"

"Hi, Jake!" Cam lifted the boy off of the special block he'd strapped to a kitchen chair so Jacob could sit at the table. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yas! Frew po-wige."

"Did you help clean it up?"

"Yas!"

"No he didn't," Tess smiled, "but he apologized."

"That's my boy." Cam kissed Jacob's forehead, and Tess's heart squeezed in her chest.

Ian cleared his throat, and when the little family turned to him,

he raised one bushy brow, as if to remind them that he was still waiting on an answer.

Cam glanced at her, and she just smiled. Taking that as an approval, he turned back to his father and let his proud grin show again. “Da, Tess is pregnant.”

Ian put down his spoon and sat back. “Is she now?” Tess found herself gripping the back of one of the chairs, not sure how her father-in-law would respond. But he pushed himself away from the table, and to her surprise, enveloped her in a gentle hug. She had no choice but to hug him back. It felt nice. Comfortable.

“Congratulations.” He turned to Cam and offered his hand. They shook, and then Ian pulled his son into a hug.

“Thank you, Da. We’re excited.”

“Good. Ye should be.” He shook his head, almost disbelievingly, and sat back down. “Another grandkid.”

She knew that Ian and Jacob—Jake, as he called him—had become close. The boy seemed to love having someone else who doted on him, and the old man was surprisingly patient. He’d sit and teach Jacob all sorts of things he needed to know about living in Wyoming, and didn’t seem to care when her son got distracted. Still, there was bound to be a different connection with this baby, wasn’t there? This baby would actually be of his blood.

“How many grandchildren do you have?” Cam had told her all about his older sisters, married years ago in Ontario, but she couldn’t remember all of his nieces and nephews.

“Between my three girls, I’ve got eleven grandkids. The oldest, Robert, is close to twenty, but then, Beth got started early.” The youngest of ’em is turnin’ five this winter.” She was amazed that he could keep them all straight, having not even met the youngest ones. “Jake is my youngest grandkid, and now he’s going to be a big brother.” Tess smiled—it seemed that she couldn’t stop smiling this morning—when she realized that he was including Jacob with the rest of his family. It was amazing to her how easily the MacLeod men had accepted her son.

Shoveling another bite of porridge into his mouth, Ian pointed a spoon at her. “Well,” he said around the food, “That explains Tessa’s unnatural giddiness.” She giggled again, and he smiled.

He was right; she *was* happy. For someone who usually kept her emotions carefully controlled, all of this smiling and giggling felt odd to even her. But she couldn’t help it. She *was* happy.

Joshua’s death had been hard for her to bear, and not just because she was left alone to birth his son in the middle of the untamed Montana Territory. He had been her friend since they were both children, since he helped her father in the family store. He’d

known her youthful secrets, and had been her dearest friend. When he died, it was like losing that last connection to her childhood. She had mourned his loss, because she'd miss him… and because she'd now have to start over all alone, with an infant.

After she'd birthed Jacob, she'd known there'd be no more children for her. No other man would be as accepting of her mixed blood as Joshua had been, and she could barely support the two of them as it was. Jacob was enough for her, and she cherished her time with him, knowing she wouldn't have any other children.

But now! Now she had a husband and a home and a life, and was going to have another baby. The pregnancy would explain her weariness and achiness that she'd attributed to getting used to life on the ranch. Last night, after Cam had fallen asleep with his arms around her, she'd counted back, and figured that she'd gotten pregnant soon after their marriage. That meant that the baby would be born in the spring. He or she was a symbol of their new beginning here outside of Cheyenne.

She was startled from her musings when Cam slipped one arm around her middle, pulling her close. Jacob chose that moment to transfer allegiance from his Daddy to her, and threw himself against her shoulder. Cam chuckled and braced her, and then dropped a quick kiss to her head. Turning to the stove, he scooped himself a big bowl of the porridge, and when he sat down, his father passed him the honey. They were so alike in their habits and mannerisms, in spite of Ian's grumpy tendencies and Cam's cheerfulness.

"Well," he said around a mouthful of breakfast, as Tess sunk to a chair to cuddle Jacob, "I guess we'll have plenty to be thankful for this year."

Ian jabbed his spoon towards his son. "Yer darn right, ye do. The Lord's blessed ye—" he gestured to Tess as well, "blessed ye both —and Thanksgivin's the time to appreciate it."

"Thanksgiving?" Tess knew it was a holiday in the fall, but only because women would come into her parents' store to buy extra provisions at that time of year. It sounded a bit like Christmas, what with all of the eating that supposedly went on. Her family had never bothered to celebrate it.

Both men were staring at her in surprise. "You mean you didn't celebrate Thanksgiving?"

She shrugged, a little self-consciously. "We never really celebrated much. There was always work to be done, or money to be saved."

Ian's laugh was more of a bark. "But it's been a holiday for twenty years! Yer President Lincoln made it official here, but we celebrated it even back in Glengarry. It marks the harvest an' all of the

good foods comin' out of the fields. Ye're supposed to take a day of rest an' eat yerself stupid and give thanks for yer blessings."

He looked like he was still waiting on an answer, but she didn't know how to explain. In a family trapped between two cultures, few holidays were celebrated. Her mother got Christmas, and her father got the lunar New Year, and everyone celebrated birthdays. But otherwise, they focused on supplying goods to other celebrators. Instead of saying all of that, though, Tess just shrugged again. "My mother always said we were blessed to be able to work hard."

Cam had finished shoveling his breakfast in, and crossed to the basin to drop in his dirty bowl. He squeezed her shoulder as he passed, as if to tell her that he understood. She was more grateful for his gesture than she would have thought. He was such a kind man that it sometimes brought tears to her eyes. "Tessa's first Thanksgiving will have to be special, Da. What do you think?"

"I think ye're right. I'll see what I can do with her."

Cam was still smiling when he dropped a kiss to her forehead. She turned her face towards his, and eagerly accepted a more wifely good-morning kiss. As always, his kiss made her heart clench, despite the distraction of Jacob trying to pull the buttons off of her blouse. Cam finished with another light peck, and a wider smile. "Have fun with Da. And rest today, Mrs. MacLeod." He took his coat down from the hook and pulled it on. On the way out the door, he turned to her again. "*And* try to figure out soon that you love me, okay?" Then he was gone again.

Ian's brows were drawn in when she looked back at him, and he seemed on the verge of saying something about his son's final words, but he must have changed his mind. Going back to his breakfast, they sat in silence for a few minutes. Well, except for Jacob; even having a cold couldn't keep him quiet, and he chattered in his own language without any input from his mother.

Hopefully her father-in-law wasn't going to push the subject. He probably wouldn't understand why she didn't love his son; why she couldn't love him. Cam was wonderful, and Ian knew it, and so he knew there was something wrong with her. He was probably appalled that she was married to a man she didn't love; *he'd* been in love with his wife for thirty-five years of marriage. In fact, he still spoke lovingly of her, and she'd been gone for five years now. No, he wouldn't understand Tess's inability to love her husband.

So she breathed a sigh of relief when he stood to take his bowl to the wash basin, and then rested his hip against the counter, his stance so like his son's. "So ye've never celebrated Thanksgiving before? Ye interested in helping me cook this year?"

"Yes!" Was her agreement a little too forceful? That's okay; she

was pleased he was changing the subject. “Just tell me what to do, Da, and I’ll try.”

A nod, and Ian disappeared for a minute. She put Jacob down on the floor to play—although he wasn’t his usual energetic self—and started doing the washing up. Her father-in-law returned with a piece of paper and a pencil from Cam’s study. Sitting at the table, he began to list aloud the ingredients they’d need to make a special meal. She was drawn into his musings, and started to make her own offers, which he wrote down. The fact that he was giving her ideas credence made her feel more comfortable with the holiday planning, and she started to make other suggestions. Soon they had a menu planned, and a shopping list for the next time they went into Cheyenne. Tess was amused by the ritual of the menu; Ian made it sound like they *had* to have certain foods in order to make it a traditional Thanksgiving. It was probably more to do with what he was used to than any sort of prescribed meal. Still, it made her smile to see his intent planning.

After the menu, they discussed who to invite. Everyone at the Open Skye would be there, of course, but he asked if she wanted to invite anyone else. She hesitantly suggested the Carderocks and the Selkirk ladies, because she didn’t know too many others. He scowled, and she hastened to take back her suggestion.

“Nah, we’ll invite them.” He wrote down their names. “But if Serena comes, she’s bound to bring those interferin’ old biddies.” Tess didn’t quite smile at his description of Agnes and Agatha, but it was close. “They’re always tryin’ to marry me off.” A giggle escaped then, and Tess was pleased to see Ian smile in response. “An’ how about the Barkers? They might have their own celebration planned…”

“Yes, please! Everyone was so welcoming to Jacob and me, and I’d love to have the chance to repay them.”

“Fine, fine.” He wrote down their names, and did a headcount. “Well, if everyone comes, we’ll need more food, but the ladies will bring some too. Ye’ve never tasted anything finer than Molly’s desserts, so let’s hope she comes.”

“She brought a cake when she visited, and it was the most delicious thing I’ve ever had.”

“Yep. Amazin’ that she can handle three little ones an’ a cake an’ not trip or anythin’.”

Tess smiled then, slightly. “Well, she seems like an amazing woman.”

To her surprise, Ian reached across the table and patted her hand. “Ye are too, Tessa MacLeod. We’re lucky to have ye.”

His words caused a blush to rise up her neck, but she didn’t have a response. Instead she just gripped his hand and squeezed it. He squeezed back, and then grinned proudly. “All these people better

show up, so I can tell them all about my latest grandbaby!"

Jacob chose that moment to hit himself in the head with a wooden spoon and began to cry. The sweet interlude with her father-in-law was over, but as she exasperatedly tried to comfort her son, the sense of peace remained. Ian approved of her and cared for her, no matter her feelings towards his son.

She kissed Jacob and gave him a piece of bread to quiet him. Placing her hand over her stomach, she wondered what life was going to be like this time next year, when she had two little ones to care for. The thought made her terrified and excited all at once. She was going to have a baby. She had a husband who said he loved her, and a son who was growing up strong in his new home. She had a purpose and shared a dream with her husband, and she had a father-in-law who approved of her. She had more than she could have imagined only a few months before.

So why did she feel like something was missing?

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



He couldn't figure out if she was being stubborn or just plain ignorant. Nah, that was too harsh a word; Tess was pretty sharp. But she didn't seem to recognize her love for him. He figured that she needed some kind of epiphany, to make her understand that "love" was nothing more than comfort, acceptance, mutual goals, and concern. And she showed him every day that she felt those things.

It was a good thing that he was a pretty confident man; otherwise he would've started to doubt his conviction as the weeks passed and she still didn't reply to his now-ritual "I love you, Tessa." He didn't want to push her. He wanted her to figure this out of her own. To that end, he tried everything. He kissed her around his father and the cowboys, and touched her enough to make her breathless. He was solicitous and caring, and he made sure that she was happy. And she did the same in return, eagerly matching his kisses and caring for his comforts. But Tess just couldn't seem to figure out that if *he* was doing it because he loved *her*, then she must be doing it because *she* loved *him.* It was damned frustrating, but Cam took Molly's words to heart, and vowed to be patient.

They went to Cheyenne again to visit Sebastian and Serena, and catch up on all the news. Sebastian had gotten an earful from his wife after their last adventure, and Cam figured the least he could do was commiserate, after he'd dragged Sebastian into the mess in the first place. Serena was teaching literature at Sebastian's school now, and Sebastian had been tapped for the headmaster's position. It sounded like a boring and stuffy job to Cam, but there was a reason he never bothered to finish school. He knew Sebastian would enjoy it, if he took the position, and that he'd probably do great things for the kids in Cheyenne. It was good to see the Selkirk ladies, too; Agnes—or maybe it was Agatha—made a point of asking after his father, and tittered when Cam mentioned he seemed less grumpy since Jake joined their family. They were thrilled to get Tess's invitation to Thanksgiving dinner, and immediately accepted.

As they were leaving, he realized that Serena hadn't mentioned Tess's pregnancy, and he asked his wife about it on the way out of

town. Jake was sitting on his lap, driving the team happily, and Tess was relaxing beside him. In response to his question, she just smiled slightly—that little grin of hers that was usually the only indication if she was happy—and said "I thought you might like to announce it at Thanksgiving."

Freeing one hand from Jake's, he wrapped his fingers through hers. "We announce it together, Mrs. MacLeod."

"Deal." She squeezed, and he felt his heart squeeze as well.

Apparently she was serious about not spilling their secret, because she didn't mention it to Molly either, when he finally got around to taking her and Jake to visit "Mr. Barker's horsies". The two of them really enjoyed themselves, and even though he had to take another full day away from his responsibilities, it was worth it to see their excitement. And to be honest, he'd probably walk across hot coals for a chance at some of Molly's baked goods. That woman could *cook*.

He left the womenfolk with the kids, and went to find Ash and Nate. The two men were in the corral behind the largest stable, taking a break from whatever magic they normally worked with the mustangs. They were happy to have the bottles of cold beer he brought, and drank in companionable silence until Nate asked how things were going with Tess. Cam took that as an invitation to spill out all of his woes, and appreciated the way they listened.

Leaning against the fence, Nate seemed unwilling to meet his eyes, but just took another slug of the beer when Cam finished. Ash twisted the bottle in his hands, and then looked out at the two mares comforting each other in the shade of the corral's only tree. He was quiet, but Cam could see him thinking.

"Seems to me," Ash finally said in that slow drawl of his, "That you need to show her what being in love means."

"Like I haven't been?" Cam tried not to scoff, but Ash wasn't telling him anything he hadn't already tried. He turned to Nate. "You got anything obvious to add?"

The younger man snorted. "If I knew *anything* about women, do you think I'd be stuck moping after a gal who's obviously moved on?"

The reference to Nate's trouble with Wendy brought a sympathetic frown to Cam's lips. At least *his* wife loved him, even if she didn't realize it. He sighed.

"Well then," Ash wasn't discouraged, "Just teach her."

"*What*?"

"Get her alone, away from everything, and *teach* her what it means to be in love. Explain it to her…"

Cam's brows rose as he considered the implications, but Nate interrupted his thoughts. "Yeah, and if that doesn't work, just tell her

that she loves you and that's that." The younger man straightened as his brother and Cam turned identical amused looks on him. "What?"

Ash's snort was mocking. "You really *don't* know anything about women, do you?" All three of them laughed at that, and Cam felt the tension drain away.

Later, riding beside his wife on the way back to their home, he thought about Ash's advice. He could do it. He could get Tess alone, maybe something simple like a picnic. He could explain his feelings, and *why* he felt the way he did, and help her to understand her feelings for *him*. It was straightforward, and maybe even easy. He'd ask Da about watching Jacob for the day, sometime soon. If Cam worked hard for the next few days, he could make up for the wasted day at the Barkers, and still have extra time for a day alone with his wife.

He found himself getting excited at the possibility. Not just at the thought of her finally understanding this love they had for each other, but at the chance of spending a whole day with just her. As much as he loved Jacob, the little boy had been a part of their lives since they met. The only time Cam had alone with Tess was after the day's work was done and the boy was in bed. Of course, Cam put that time to good use—he felt his jeans getting a little tight just thinking about what they spent their time doing—but it never seemed enough. He wanted an entire day with her; a day to learn more about her, to discuss their futures and their pasts and their feelings. He wanted to touch her in broad daylight, to see her reactions under the Wyoming sun.

He wanted to teach his wife how to love him.



It was two days before Thanksgiving. Da had told her that the holiday was traditionally held on the last Thursday of November, per President Lincoln's decree, and Tess had been amazed that he could remember something like that. He hadn't even lived in America until five years ago! But Ian was a font of historic trivia, and often kept Jacob spellbound with stories from ancient Rome or his own native Scotland. Tess herself had been a small child when the War Between the States ended and Lincoln was killed, and she'd never celebrated Thanksgiving. She'd have to take Da's word for the date.

She'd been busy for the last few days with cleaning the house and prep work for the meal; Ian had her chopping herbs, cubing old bread, and peeling potatoes to use on Thursday. He said it was easier to cook for that many people if you had all of your ingredients

prepared ahead of time. Again, Tess just had to trust him, since she'd *never* had to make a meal for so many people before. Molly had sent a message via Nate last week that the Barker family and Annie would be pleased to join them for Thanksgiving, and that Molly would be bringing desserts. Tess had breathed a sigh of relief at that last part; she'd been terrified at the thought of having to bake for Molly and have the older woman compare their pies. Now she could just focus on following Da's instructions for the main meal.

Between the extra prep work and Jacob's excitement—his granda had told him all about the upcoming holiday—and the baby, Tess was more exhausted than usual. So yesterday before dinner, when Cam had wrapped his arms around her from behind, she'd been happy to take some of his strength.

"Tomorrow, Da's going to watch Jake. Pack some food for us. I'm taking you away from here, Mrs. MacLeod."

She'd tried to turn in his arms then, to demand more details, but he'd kissed the side of her neck, effectively trapping her. She'd tilted her head to give him better access. "I can't just leave, Cam. There's too much to do before Thanksgiving."

"Just one day, Tessa. Pack enough for lunch and dinner."

Later, when she was tucked against him in their bed, she'd tried again, asking where they were going, and if Jacob could go with them.

She'd felt him smile against her back. "Nope. Tomorrow is going to be a day just for you and me. The whole day, no one else to bother us. I'm going to teach you some stuff. Da raised four kids and some of his grandkids. He and Jake will be just fine together."

"But naptime will be…"

"Jake's been here long enough that Da knows his routine. Lunch, story, song, blankie, backrub. He'll be fine, and I promise you Jake will love the time and attention."

Tess had sighed then, knowing Cam was right. Ian and Jake had a special bond, and the boy would probably love the time with his granda. She'd stopped worrying about her son, and started trying to guess Cam's plans for the day. She had fallen asleep wondering what he'd meant to "teach" her.

And now it was the morning, two days before Thanksgiving, and she'd tucked away all of the peeled potatoes, and admonished Ian not to let Jacob mess up the house too much. "Tomorrow I'll scrub the floors, but if you could make sure he doesn't track in too much dirt, that would be helpful. And if he's looking for something to do, have him wipe down the cabinets and tables in the parlor with a damp cloth. And—"

Her instructions were cut off with a squeal when Cam lifted her

onto a mare he'd led up to the front porch. Ian and Jacob stood, hand-in-hand, each grinning as they watched her try to get comfortable on the horse. She figured Jacob was excited to have the whole day without his mother, but she couldn't begin to guess what Da was smirking about. She gave them both a good glare, to let them know that she meant what she'd said.

Cam swung up on a horse beside her, making sure the bundle of food was secure behind him. Satisfied, he turned back to the two on the porch. "Jake, mind your granda, okay?"

"Yah, Daddy."

"Da, make sure he doesn't undo all of Tessa's hard work, okay?"

"Aye, son." Ian's innocent gaze matched his grandson's so well that both Tess and Cam had trouble controlling their smiles.

"Tessa," she was startled when Cam turned towards her. "Da and Jake will be fine. Try to relax and enjoy yourself, okay?"

She did smile then, and his answering grin was immediate. "Yes, husband."

A quick nod, "Good", and then he urged his horse towards the gate. She followed, after blowing one last kiss to Jacob, and they were on their way.

It was a fine day, cold and dry. She was wearing the riding skirt Mrs. Newell had given her when she left Fort Laramie, and a sweater with a scarf. She had her winter jacket as well, but hadn't needed it yet. Being pregnant had kept her warm enough, although maybe it was because she'd been living in Montana for the last years. The Wyoming winter had been, thus far, nowhere near as miserable as the heavy wet snows up in Montana. Cam told her it would snow plenty during the cold season, but it didn't usually get bad until mid-winter. So far she enjoyed the colder temperatures, but she hadn't spent as much time outside as she was going to today.

After an hour, she was pleased for her thick gloves and her scarf and hat. Cam knew that she wasn't that experienced with horses, and seemed to be taking it slow for her. They walked slowly along, and he pointed out landmarks and parts of his land she'd never seen. The pride in his voice was infectious; she soon grew excited about the hidden wonders of the ranch, asking questions about the things she saw. She loved the way his green eyes sparkled when he talked about his—*their*—home, and wondered if they'd match the color of the grass come the spring.

"So, husband." His lips quirked up at her words. "Are you going to tell me *why* you dragged me out here into the middle of nowhere?"

"What, can't I be spontaneous?"

"You're a planner. And I packed two pounds of meat, dried

fruits, canned beans, and rolls. That's not exactly spontaneous."

There was no hiding his grin now. "OK, so it was planned." He shrugged. "I just wanted to get you away for a bit. All to myself."

"Why?"

"Because I've been married to you for three months, and you're carrying my child, but we haven't got to spend any time to ourselves."

She flushed slightly at his words, but doubted he could see, behind her scarf. She *was* his wife, the mother of his child. And despite—or maybe because of—her curiosity, the thought of spending an entire day alone with him had made her feel warm since he mentioned it.

"And since you're a *planner*, did you have any *plans* for today?"

"A few."

Heavens, the look he gave her was quite… smoldering, and she was suddenly very much looking forward to whatever he had planned. She had to clear her throat before she spoke again. "And do you have a destination in mind for these plans? It's a little cold to be… *entertaining* ourselves outside."

He laughed then, probably at her choice of words. "You think this is cold? Just wait 'til February."

"Cam." She managed to make his name *sound* like an eye-roll.

"We're going to my house." He was still chuckling.

"I've seen your house. I washed its windows yesterday, and cooked breakfast in it this morning. Remember?"

"Not that one." That crooked smile made her stomach do little flips. "The one I built. I want to show you the house I lived in when I started the Open Skye, the one Da moved into. It's nothing compared to our house now, but…"

But he'd built it himself, and it'd been his home for years, and of *course* Tess wanted to see it. "I can't wait, Cam."

They rode for another hour. Tess recognized that he was taking it slowly for her, knowing she wasn't as comfortable on a horse as he was. She was beginning to get hungry, and wondered if they'd stop for lunch before they reached the house, or if they were waiting, how far away it was. Since realizing that she was pregnant, her appetite had doubled, it seemed. Her stomach was already beginning to grow—much earlier than it had happened with Jacob—and she joked that she didn't know if it was because of the baby, or the extra servings of food.

But when she finally started to ask Cam how much farther, she realized that he'd stopped his steady stream of information, and was anxiously watching the sky to the north. When he saw her looking at him, he sent her a tight smile that she figured was supposed to be reassuring. "What is it?"

Thick brows drawn in over those green eyes, he said, “There’s a storm coming through. Sometimes they crop up suddenly, but at this time of year it probably won’t be a nice one.”

Sure enough, the northern sky now seemed to roil with thick gray clouds, and the day didn’t seem quite so carefree anymore. “Should we turn back?”

“No, we’re a lot closer to the old house than the new. We’ll hunker down there.” His words were clipped. Not quite ‘harsh’, but Tess could tell that he wasn’t pleased with this development. Strangely, she wasn’t scared, despite his tone. She trusted him to make sure that they would be safe.

The wind picked up. She twisted in the saddle to slip on her heavy coat, and watched Cam button his up to his chin. Whatever was in that storm bearing down on them, it wasn’t going to be pleasant. Tess hoped it wasn’t cold enough yet to snow, because she didn’t want to be trapped away from Jacob with limited food. But she knew that Cam would make the best decisions. When he suggested they pick up the pace, she didn’t hesitate to kick her mare into a trot behind his.

When then rain hit, it was icy and thick. It wasn’t quite snow, but cold needles of slush that hit her exposed skin and made the horse shift uncomfortably. Cam urged them both into a spine-jolting canter, and then a gallop, and soon it was all she could do to hold onto the saddle and the reins. All she could see in the storm was his broad back, and she wondered how such a promising day had turned sour so quickly.

They didn’t speak, but when Cam yelled directions to her, he sounded angry. She didn’t want to agonize over what would happen to them, so she wondered about her husband’s reaction. Was he angry over the weather? Or his plans gone awry?

Then there was a particularly nasty clap of thunder, and his horse seemed to trip. The animal went down with a scream and a sickening *popping* noise. Cam’s yell of pain mixed with the horse’s, and she turned nauseous with fear.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Cam felt his leg twist under the mare, the animal coming down hard on him. He bellowed when he heard something in his ankle pop, and then yelled again a moment later when the pain hit. It was intense; maybe not the nastiest pain he'd ever experienced, but at that moment, he couldn't recall anything worse. Hot on the heels of the pain came the anger. Anger at his horse for the fall, at the weather for ruining his plans for the day, and at himself for being hurt by something any rookie cowpuncher knew to avoid.

The mare was stunned for a moment and he needed her off *now*, so that he could see how badly they were both hurt. He kicked her in the side with his free foot, cursing her and the stinging rain both. She lumbered to her feet, and the release of her weight brought a relief so great his eyes watered. Cursing louder now, to distract himself from the pain, he used the stirrup and the saddle horn to pull himself upright, resisting the urge to drive a shoulder into the horse's side out of spite.

He'd always known that he felt things too strongly, and reacted too fiercely. He tended to wear his emotions on his face, where everyone knew what he was thinking. Luckily, he found a lot to be happy about, and even his wife had commented on his constant smiling. But when he was angered—like now, or when he dealt with Willis and Crowley—the rage built up inside him until he wanted to attack someone.

This wasn't the horse's fault, though, and he had to remind himself of that. The weather was just an act of God, too. The horse had been just as blind as Cam had been, and the thunder caused her to step funny. Cataloging the accident helped him calm his fury enough to hop to the mare's hind leg. He couldn't tell if it was broken, and he didn't want to lose her if he didn't have to.

Then, and only then, did he allow himself to look at his wife. She'd reined in her horse beside him, her face calm and her eyes wide with fear. Another burst of anger coursed through him at the thought of his delicate *pregnant* wife sitting in the middle of an ice storm because of *his* stupid mistake. She must have seen something in his

face then, because she started to dismount, as if to go to him.

"No." He knew his growl was rough, but he couldn't help it. Anger and pain made him rough. "Stay there. I'm fine."

He could tell that she didn't believe him, from the way her lips pressed thinly together. But he turned back to his horse, and began to remove the bundles from the saddle bags, transferring them to her saddle. Each limped hop brought a new jolt of pain, and he bit his tongue until he tasted blood. Such a stupid little accident, to hurt so much! The anger seemed to keep the pain at bay, though, so he fanned his disgust at himself.

Soon there was a white ball of flame sitting uncomfortably in his gut, but it helped him forget his ankle. Then he made the mistake of looking up at Tess again, and saw her worry, which somehow made it worse. She reached out one hand, and said "Let me—"

"I said I'm fine." He all but barked at her, and then scowled at his own harshness when her cheeks pinked. He wanted to apologize, but instead slipped the bridle and saddle off his mare, letting them drop to the ground, and slapped her rear. He had no way of knowing if she was hurt too badly to make it home. If she was, it would've been kinder to put a bullet in her brain now. But without knowing, and with his own damned injury, he wanted to give her a chance.

Scowling, he pulled himself up behind Tess, awkward on one foot. She pulled her feet out of the stirrups to let him get comfortable. He just lifted her up and out of the way, settling her back across his thighs. She sat just as stiffly as she had that first time they'd ridden together, that hot August afternoon when he found her. Then it was because she didn't know him, and was scared. Now it was because… he sighed. Because of his anger.

"I'm sorry, Tessa."

"For what?" Her words were clipped, and he wondered if she was just being stubborn.

"For snapping at you. I'm angry. At myself."

"And in pain."

He didn't respond, but she softened against him, and patted his thigh gently. Her ease helped him relax slightly, and he concentrated on how nice it was to hold her. If it weren't for the freezing rain, and the fact that every step of her horse sent another jolt of pain up his left leg, this might have been a nice afternoon ride.

He hadn't realized how close they were to his old ranch house. Or maybe the pain and the mind-numbing ride made the time go faster. But Tess was shivering against him when he saw the fence he'd put up eight years ago and knew they were almost there. His mare was still hobbling behind them, despite the pace he'd set, which meant that he'd dropped his saddle for nothing. That realization

caused his anger to flare again.

He directed the animals towards the barns, and slid down to unbar the doors. Smitty and Sanderson had been here within the last two weeks, so he knew everything was well-stocked. Since taking control of the Double-S, he'd intended to keep his original ranch and the outbuildings as a sort of 'outpost', but once he'd sold off so much stock, he didn't need it to be manned all the time.

Tess sat still atop her horse until he lifted her down, and he wondered if he'd scared her into complacence, or if she just didn't know what to do. After caring for both animals as best as he could, he was embarrassed by how much weight he had to lean on his wife—his tiny, *pregnant* wife—to carry the supplies up to the house. But she didn't say a word, only pushed him into a chair as soon as they were out of the wind and sleet.

He watched her peel off the hat and scarf, revealing a face even paler than usual. Her teeth were chattering, and that pushed him out of the chair, towards the stack of firewood by the hearth. He heard her start to say something, but then snap her mouth closed again. When he had the fire blazing, he turned back to see her stripping off the wet riding skirt. Whatever he'd intended to say—he couldn't recall, suddenly—died at the sight of her in a blouse and bloomers, hurrying towards the warmth of the fire. He wanted to wrap his arms around her, to drive some of the ice away, but knew that until he got out of his own wet clothes, he wouldn't be any help.

It was a struggle, though, to pull off his own sheepskin coat, and he finally heard an exasperated sigh from his wife. "Cam! Can I help you *now,* please?"

Tess's arms were crossed—pushing those pert little breasts up, and *why* did he have to notice *that*?—and her foot was all but tapping on the uneven wooden floor. She looked so exasperated that his frustration melted away. She must have taken his pause for agreement, because she hurried to the chair and peeled the rest of the coat down his arms. Then, kneeling before him, she began to work his boots off. The right one came off without any fuss, of course, but his left ankle had already swollen to fit the leather. He was afraid they were going to have to cut the boot off, but he didn't want to lose his favorite pair. He wouldn't have taken it off at all, had it not been necessary to take off his jeans to get warm. But as she worked and tugged and slid, he bit his tongue to keep from crying out. She did enough apologizing and gasping in sympathy for both of them… and the boot came off. The pain was blinding then, as much as it'd been when the mare first landed. Cam closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the chair, and tried not to be sick. Small hands, and an icy blast, brought him back to himself. She'd found a bowl, and gone

out to fill it with sleet. Now, carefully, she eased his entire foot into the freezing water… and it seemed to help.

Desperate, now, to distract himself, he grabbed her hand as she went by. "Tessa, I truly *am* sorry."

She never had a particularly expressive face, and now was no different. But he thought he could see a softening around her lips and in those dark eyes. She brushed the fingers of her left hand through his wet hair. "I understand. It's alright. Being in pain could make anyone terse."

She dropped a kiss to his forehead and slipped away. He could hear her rummaging in the house's single bedroom. He'd built the house with himself in mind; when Da had joined him in Wyoming, they'd divided off a section of the main room for the older man. It was a rough, simple home… fine for two bachelors, but not to bring a wife home to. Da had tried to tell him that last year. He'd been right, and Cam was glad that the merger with the Double-S had brought him a finer house as well as twice the number of cattle.

Tess returned with a towel that she used to dry his hair. It wouldn't do much good, with him sitting in his wet clothes, and they both knew it. "Did the cold water help?"

"A bit, yeah."

"Good." She tried to help him out of the chair. "You need to get these clothes off. I'll help, and then you can rest your foot."

It was galling, the way he had to rely on her to stand. He couldn't manage to get the wet jeans—they clung like a second skin—past his thighs. She wasn't quite smiling when she slipped around him to help, but he saw the amusement in her eyes. He told himself that it wasn't anger that caused the tightness in his chest, but arousal at the sight of the top of her head as she knelt before him. And when she decided that his smalls were soaked through, and needed to come off as well, he realized that cold water or not, he was definitely aroused. She *was* smiling faintly when she finally sat him back down to unbutton his shirt, and that irritated him. He'd twisted his ankle, for God's sakes! He wasn't an invalid. He pushed her hands away and took off his own damn shirt.

When she disappeared to find him a blanket, he took a few deep breaths and tried to understand what had him so riled. Why couldn't he seem to let go of his anger? Why was he still snapping at Tess?

He hadn't figured it out by the time she wrapped him in a scratchy wool blanket he recognized from the bedroom. The anger was still simmering as he watched her prepare a late lunch for them both, seeming at ease prancing around half-naked in a strange kitchen. They ate in silence, and he was glad for the heat from the

roaring fire.

After, Tess got him another bowl of icy slush, and reported the storm was still fierce, but hadn't turned to snow yet. He grunted, having assumed as much from the sound of the needles of rain on the house's two windows.

He heard her sigh, and then sink down into a chair opposite him. Her crossed arms and stern expression reminded him of the way she disciplined Jake, and eased the anger knotting his stomach. "What?"

"Will you *please* tell me what the problem is? Why are you so… so angry?"

"I'm not—"

"Don't lie to me, Cam, even if you think it's what I want to hear."

"Okay…"

"I mean it. Not ever." Had he thought she looked stern before? Now she was downright severe.

"Fine. I'm not alright. Is that what you want to hear?"

"I want to know *why*."

"Because my foot hurts!"

She stood up then, and started to pace, and Cam wanted to be able to reach her, to hold her. For both of their sakes. "I know it hurts. But what are you angry about?"

"I'm angry because a stupid mistake like that will cost me. I don't think my ankle's broken—"

"I don't think so either."

"—But it's going to make it hard to work for a few weeks. I don't know if the mare will recover, or if I'll lose her too. I can't believe I let her bolt like that, over a little thunder." All of the disgust he'd been feeling spilled out then, disgust at himself.

She stood up then, and crossed the distance between them. The heat from her was intoxicating, and how could such a tiny thing be so warm? He wanted to gather her close, to lose himself in her. To let her melt the tight ball of irritation in the pit of his stomach.

"So you're angry at the accident, and you're in pain?" He didn't say anything. "That's why you're acting like a child?"

A part of him knew that she was right, but he couldn't help the scowl, or the defense. "My foot's killing me, Tessa."

"Why don't you tell me what you're really angry about?"

"*Fine*!" He tried to stand up then, but between the hand she placed on his shoulder, and the way his ankle gave out under him, he sank back down. "You want to know what I'm angry? I'm angry at myself, and at this stupid storm. I had plans for today, Tessa. And this damn fool accident means they're not going to happen."

"What plans?" Her quiet question reminded him of the way she's teased him that morning about being spontaneous.

His bark of laughter was harsh, scornful. "I wanted to show you this house. I wanted you to be impressed by what I built, before I knew anything about Wyoming. I wanted to peel the clothes off of you and make love to you in front of that fire." A flush crept up her cheeks, then, but she didn't drop his gaze. "I wanted to lay you down and show you how much I love you. And *then* I was going to tell you how much *you* love *me*."

Her brows drew in, and she licked her lower lip, as if trying to find words to rebuff him. Damn his ankle! He stood up then, resting all of his weight on his right leg, towering over her again. "Don't deny it—deny *me*—again, Tessa. I *know* you love me, even if you don't."

"*How*?" She all but wailed, and he heard in her voice all of the fear and hope and worry that she hadn't shown on her face. "How could you *possibly* know that?"

"Because." He grabbed her cheeks then, in both hands, and kissed her. And to his astonishment, and rough joy, she kissed him back. He lifted her against him, and felt small arms wrap around his neck.

"Because," he tried again, after he'd let her slide down his chest, both of them gasping. "It's true. I'm yelling and angry and sound like a bear, but you're not scared of me, are you?"

"No." She pushed away from him then, not convinced. "You'd never hurt me."

"Oh no? I spend my days roping and riding and lifting and I can knock a man down with one fist. What makes you so sure I won't hurt you?"

Her chin came up. "Because you love me."

"Because I love you," he agreed, "and I would never hurt you."

Cam sank down to the chair then, and grabbing her hand, pulled her down to his lap. "I'm snapping at you, I'm in pain, and here you are, tending to me. You even took my damn pants off, Tessa."

"You couldn't. I had to help."

"Why?"

She seemed flustered that he had to ask. "I *had* to, Cam. You were so miserable. I had to try to make you feel better."

"*Why*?"

"Because that's what a good wife does." He heard the hidden question in her voice, though, and saw it in her eyes. She still didn't understand.

"Yeah, but that's not all, is it?"

"I don't…"

"You care for me. You don't like to see me hurt, and you

wanted to make me feel better."

Exasperatedly, she threw her hands up. "Is *that* what you wanted to hear? Of *course* I care for you, Cam. You're my husband!"

He captured her hand, and placed a kiss on the palm. Suddenly, he didn't feel so angry anymore. He was at peace, trying to explain things to his obtuse wife.

"You care about me, Tessa MacLeod. You feel comfortable around me. You dream about a future with me. You try to make me happy, and you appreciate it when I try to make you happy. You tolerate my habits, and accept my faults. You make a point of knowing what I like, and trying to give that to me. You're *kind* to me, Tessa."

There were tears in her eyes now, but he wasn't sorry. He loved her, and loved the way her expressions were so hard to read. But he saw confusion in the way her lips were drawn down, and she chewed on her lip.

Finally, hesitantly, she offered a final denial, "But…"

"Caring, kindness, comfort. Dreams and hopes and happiness. Tolerance and acceptance, Tessa." He took a deep breath, and watched her watching him. "That's love. *You love me*."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



You love me. Was it true? Was that—the warmth and the acceptance and the happiness and the excitement about the future that she'd been feeling lately—*love*?

Tess sat up straight, her eyes wide. She felt as if a band that had been wrapped around her insides—so tightly she hadn't even noticed it was there—had loosened and was falling away. She was freer, could breathe more deeply.

It *was* love. She was *in love* with her husband. Slowly, a smile, a real smile, crept across her face. All of the wonder and excitement, and yes, *love* was spilling out of her, and when she turned it on her husband, his answering smile was blinding.

"So you've stopped arguing, eh?"

"I didn't know…" Her whisper was barely a breath, but she knew he heard it. She loved him, and had no idea. Why had she fought it for so long? Was it just that she hadn't understood what love *was*, and therefore didn't recognize it? If she hadn't understood it, did that mean that she'd been missing it for years? She loved Jacob, certainly. But had she loved Joshua too? Barely a heartbeat passed before she acknowledged *yes*, she'd loved her first husband. He'd been her friend and partner, but her feelings for him would never compare to the way she felt about Cam.

She'd been so foolish, to deny them both. Now that she saw, it was so obvious. He had been saying the words for months, now, but she'd refused to acknowledge what they meant. She felt for him the same way he felt for her, but hadn't known the words to describe it.

Turning, she cupped his cheek in one hand, loving the feel of his stubble under her palm. He smiled, and she saw true happiness in those beautiful green eyes. She wondered at his ability to switch between anger and joy so easily, and to show both so readily. He so rarely got mad around her, but it was nice to know that she could talk him out of it if necessary. All she had to do was distract him.

"Well, Tessa? Have you figured it out yet?"

She kissed him then, and reveled in the way his strong arm reached around her to draw her closer. No, she *loved* it, and *loved*

being able to call it ‘love’. She wasn’t ready to say so yet, though. This was a big revelation for her, and she didn’t want to rush into anything. She wanted to take her time, to understand, before she said the words.

So, knowing perfectly well what he was asking, she wouldn’t give it to him. Instead, she made love to him with her mouth, until he was hard and panting under her. She loved the power she could wield over him, without him even realizing.

Slowly, she climbed off of him, and started to slip her blouse off of her shoulders. It was dry, but the cool air caused her nipples to pucker under the chemise. Cam’s eyes latched hungrily onto them, and she took her time in peeling the rest of her clothes off. He was naked under that blanket, and when he threw it off and reached for her, she laughed.

“We could do this sitting here,” she wondered if he remembered that he still had one foot in a bowl of ice water, “Or if you’re feeling up for it, I could lay you down on that rug in front of the fire and make love to you.”

It was nearly the words he’d said to her earlier, and with a groan, Cam buried his face in her neck. She contented herself with stroking his hard shoulders until his lips wrenched a whimper from her. “Cam!”

He lifted her then, and lowered them both to the rug. It was gloriously freeing, to be naked in the middle of the room in the daylight. Tess felt so naughty, and so uninhibited. She couldn’t have said who made love to whom, but when it was over, and they were wrapped around each other, sweating and panting before the fire, it didn’t really matter.



Funny, his foot didn’t seem to hurt that much anymore. Cam stretched under her, and wondered if he’d ever been this relaxed. Letting go of his anger like that, and then chasing it away with the feel of her skin in one explosive bout of therapy… well, that’d been pretty fantastic. He smiled, and felt her lips move too.

Later, she brought him a pillow for his head, and one for his foot, but made him lie there on the rug while she fed more wood into the fire. She didn’t put any clothes on, so he didn’t mind it much. They ate, and talked, and held each other, and listened to the sound of the sleet. He learned more about her childhood, growing up between two worlds, wanted by no one but her parents. He told her all about the big Scottish community he came from, and the bitterness towards

the English clearances, and how much he wanted a large family. They both discussed children, particularly the little one growing in her womb. He swore he could feel her move, but Tess laughed and said that it was still too early, and it'd just been her stomach growling. She didn't say that she loved him, not yet, but he could see it in her eyes. More importantly, he could tell that *she* knew it too. She laughed and smiled more than he'd ever seen, and he made a point to kiss her as often as possible.

The storm didn't let up until after dark. By then, Tess had gotten anxious about leaving Jacob alone for so long. Cam pulled her down beside him. "Relax, honey. Da will take care of him, I promise. It would've been obvious that we were caught in this storm, and he'd be a fool to expect us home. He'll make sure Jake understands."

"But what if he needs me…?"

"He'll miss you," Cam kissed her temple, "But Da won't let him need you, they'll be having such a good time. They'll both be fine."

"This will be the first night I haven't kissed him goodnight."

He knew she snuck into the boy's room after he was asleep, to do just that. He also knew that their lives were changing, but didn't say that to her. "Da probably let him stay up late eating sweets and listening to stories. No one listens to his stories anymore except Jake."

He felt her lips twitch then. "I listen, sometimes. When I'm not busy." A sigh, and then: "You're right. Jacob adores your father. I'm so glad I married you. He deserves a grandfather."

"Is that the only reason you're glad, Mrs. MacLeod?" He rolled over to face her, and she tilted her head to give him better access to her neck, and they both stopped thinking about Jacob for a while.

The next morning they were up early, well-rested from all of their relaxing in front of the fireplace. He never did have a chance to show her the home he'd built, but she explored herself while taking care of him, and he swore he'd get her back here as soon as possible. Having a day to themselves had been… well, *he* sure felt a lot better, and judging from her secret smiles, his wife had made a major realization.

In order to save the last of their supplies for their trip home, he showed her where his hands kept the emergency stash of non-perishables, and she made them biscuits while she tended to his foot. He discovered that he didn't mind her pampering him, if she did it half-dressed, and he got to kiss her whenever he felt like it. She'd laugh and slap his hand away from wherever he'd grabbed her… and he'd grab her as often as possible, to make her laugh more.

After breakfast, she made him sit still while she examined his foot, and he was surprised to find out that he was ticklish. She laughed again—had she been hiding this carefree side of her, or had

some recent realization triggered it?—and held him steady with one small hand. The ankle was swollen, but so was the top of his foot. Thankfully, he could move it, even if it hurt. Tess told him that meant it wasn't broken, and he decided to believe her.

She ripped up one of the scrap blankets the men sometimes used on the animals, and used the strips to wrap his foot and ankle to keep it still on the ride home. And then, when they realized that there was no way he'd be able to fit his boot over the bandage, she wrapped more strips around it, for warmth. The temperature had dropped with the ending of the storm. The ground was muddy, yeah, but icy too. The next storm like that would bring snow, not rain.

There wasn't anything around the house to use as a crutch, and Tess wouldn't let him try to put weight on his left foot. It was damned galling to have to rely on her to help him around. But as they closed up the house—Cam again promising himself he'd bring her back here soon—and he tried not to rest too much weight on her as he hopped across to the barn, he realized that he wasn't embarrassed. He would have thought that relying so heavily on someone—especially a woman!—would have threatened his manhood. But instead, it just made him smile, to know he'd somehow lassoed such a perfect wife.

His mare's condition hadn't changed, although both horses looked happy to see them. "Sorry girl," he said after examining her leg, "but you'll have to manage alone for a bit longer." He'd rather gamble leaving her here than walking her back to the house. And with the way the weather was changing, and Tess's condition, and his bum foot, he didn't want to risk taking longer than necessary to get home. "I'll send Kelley and Perkins over here tomorrow to check you out."

"Not tomorrow." Tess was forking hay into the feed bin, because she'd insisted on finding some way to help. When he raised a brow at her, she raised a brow right back. "Tomorrow's Thanksgiving. Da and I are cooking extra to bring them out in the bunkhouse."

Oh yeah. He'd forgotten. But of course she didn't forget; she and Da had been working hard at it for a week. There'd be fifteen people, including the kids, and Cam had been looking forward to having all of his friends and family together to hear their news. But now, after the eye-opening evening he had spent with Tess, he discovered he'd rather just have her to himself for a few days, to enjoy everything they'd both learned. Of course, he also wouldn't mind if Sebastian and Nate never found out that he'd busted his foot in such a stupid accident.

Rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, he said only, "Sorry I had you away for so long. I guess you're in a rush to get back."

"Your father is a planner, just like you, and I've had an itemized list every day for the last week." She came over and kissed his brow, where he sat on a bale. "But I don't think the real work will

start ‘til tomorrow morning.”

“When’s everyone coming?”

“As soon as they can get here—or rather, there. Dinner will be around noon.”

“Well then,” Cam smiled and took her hand, pleased to just sit and stare up into her dark eyes, “I guess we’d better get you home.”

“I *am* pretty anxious about Jacob.”

He squeezed. “No you’re not.”

With a laugh, she admitted, “No, I’m not. I guess you convinced me Da can handle him. Isn’t that odd? I’ve been with him every night of his life. I should have been frantic without him, but I…”

“What?”

“I didn’t think about him much.” Her brows drew in, and he knew she was pondering something big. “Doesn’t that make me a bad mother, to basically forget about him?”

“No, Tessa.” One of his large hands could splay across her abdomen, covering it completely. He swore he could feel a gentle movement there, even if she couldn’t. “It means that you were ready for some time alone. Time to be just Tessa, not ‘mama’. Time to be a wife, not a mother.”

She placed her free hand over his on her stomach, and he glanced back into her eyes. “Before I have to be a mother again?”

Cam chuckled then. “I just had one of the most amazing nights of my life, despite this damn foot. You can bet I’ll be dragging you out here as often as Da will agree to watch Jake.” At her smile, he winked. “At least until you get too big to sit on a horse.”

With a mock glare, she pulled him to his feet. “Well, mister cripple, let’s get you on that poor animal, so she doesn’t have to carry *me*.”

They led her horse out of the barn, closing up behind. Awkwardly, he swung up into the saddle, and let her arrange his wrapped foot in the stirrup, wincing at each sharp pain. She must have noticed, because she offered to walk beside him. Laughing then, he tightened his grip on her hand and pulled her into his lap. Her squeak of surprise was cut short when she slammed into his thighs, and he wrapped one arm tightly around her middle. Having her there, so similar to their first day together, somehow made the pain less.

After making sure that her jacket was snug, he pulled his own hat down around his ears and nudged the horse towards home. It wasn’t an easy ride, with one bum foot and freezing temperatures, but she made it… made it all worthwhile.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



"Weets, mama?" Big eyes blinked up at her, and when Tess didn't immediately answer, Jacob tried again. "Weets now, Mama? Peese?"

It wasn't until the boy glanced at the wagon coming up the turnaround that Tess finally understand, and scooped her son up with a smile. She kissed him on the nose, marveling again at his memory and understanding. Both times he'd seen Molly, she'd provided him with a child's dream of sweets and desserts. He'd obviously recognized the Barkers, and decided that meant he was getting more "weets".

Maybe all kids could figure things out that well, but she thought he was particularly brilliant, of course. She kissed him again, just because he could, and a third time when he tried to push her away. Settling him on one hip, she smoothed his curls. "Not yet, honey. Mrs. Barker said she'd bring some sweets to eat after dinner, though. Remember, Granda and Mama cooked a special dinner for today and our friends?"

"Noah an' Pete?"

"And a bunch of others, too. I need you to be a big boy and a helper, okay?"

"Otay Mama."

One more kiss, and then she let him slide down her leg to stand beside her on the wide front porch. Despite the sprinkling of snow that had fallen during the night, he was wearing a soft chambray shirt she'd bought when they visited Cheyenne last, and he kept trying to tug the sleeves up. Tess hoped it was big enough to last through the following summer, but the way he was growing, it was hard to guess. She smoothed the front of her favorite red velvet jacket, and wondered how much longer she'd be able to fit into *her* clothes. Both of the skirts she'd worn during Jacob's pregnancy had since been cut up for diapers, but she'd be able to wear Cam's shirts when she got really huge.

The thought of her draped—in public!—in her husband's large shirts made her smile, and *Heavens* she was smiling a lot these days, wasn't she?

The Barkers pulled up to the house with all of the commotion she'd expected. Cam came out of the stable to help Ash and Nate with the horses, and sent their two hands—Tess had insisted on inviting them to celebrate with the Open Skye's cowboys—towards the cookhouse. The boys tumbled out of the wagon, swept Jacob up in their whirlwind, and all disappeared into the parlor.

Handing Rose to Annie, Molly climbed the stairs to embrace Tess. Then, her arms still on the younger woman's shoulders, Molly studied her. Tess could feel herself growing warm under the scrutiny, but couldn't help the small grin that tugged at her lips. Molly's answering smile was sudden and bright. "I knew it! Congratulations, Tess!" Another hug, and then the whispered, "I'm so happy for you."

Tess didn't know how Molly could possibly know about the pregnancy, or if there was something in Tess's eyes that showed her surprising, newfound love for her husband. Either way, her new friend had seen it, and understood the wonder of it. Standing there, feeling the other woman's compassion and strength wrap around her, Tess knew that she'd have many times to be thankful for a friend like Molly.

Dinner that day was a joyful—and raucous—affair. With the Carderocks, Selkirks and Barkers there, there were fifteen people. Somehow Tess had managed to fit them all into the dining room, albeit at two separate tables. Rose and Jacob were passed from lap to lap, and it was adorable to see Cam coo over the baby. She had never in her entire life eaten a meal with this many people, and was overwhelmed and gratified to think that they were all her friends. In fact, she found herself getting teary-eyed more than once during the meal, but didn't think anyone besides Cam noticed. He just smiled at her, that gentle, crooked grin she loved so much.

The meal was superb. Ian had outdone himself, and Tess made sure that everyone knew that *he* was the one who had done all of the hard work. In fact, he'd even prepared a second, smaller meal for the cowboys in the cookhouse. Even though Ian had explained the traditional Thanksgiving food was turkey back east, here they made do with what was on hand. The main dish was a roast, with sides of dressing, carrots, potatoes, beans, baked apples, two kinds of bread, and a cold salad with some kind of noodle. There were three sauces, four different jams and spreads, and Tess was amazed at Ian's creativity. The only thing she made all by herself was a dish with chopped vegetables in rice. It had been *Baba's* favorite, and Jacob loved it too. About half of her guests seemed to enjoy it; Cam's face when he tried it told her that he wasn't one of them, and she stifled a smile at his attempts to be polite.

Of course, Molly had brought dessert, and her platter of

cookies, the two pies, and the gorgeously decorated cake sat on the sideboard throughout the meal. The boys weren't the only ones casting longing looks towards the sweets, but they were the most anxious to get to them. After everyone had eaten their fill—surprisingly, it was Ash's lithe brother Nate who seemed to out-eat them all—Annie and Serena helped Tess serve coffee and tea. There was much good-natured groaning and threatening to loosen belt-buckles, when Ian spoke up.

"I know Molly's desserts are lookin' fine enough to tempt Satan himself, but we always had a little tradition in our family, an' I'm wonderin' if ye'd oblige an old man?"

Sebastian chuckled. "Anything, if it'll give us another few minutes to digest that amazing meal!"

"My wife, God rest her, started this tradition, an' Cam an' me haven't really followed it in the last years, since it's been just us." He glanced at his son, who was smiling fondly, Tess thought, in memory. "Thanksgiving's the time to remember the blessin's ye've been given over the last year, an' to thank the Lord for 'em. So before dessert, we have to go around the table an' say what we're thankful for."

There was nodding all around, with chuckles and a murmured "hear, hear". Ian said, "I'll go first." Taking a deep breath, he repositioned Jacob on his lap. The boy hadn't napped yet, but had adamantly refused to be separated from his "fwends". He was valiantly trying to stay awake on his Granda's knees long enough for pie. "I'm thankful for this little tyke. I've got eleven grandkids back east, an' I miss seein' them grow up. I didn't think Cam would ever get around to getting' married," there was some amused glances sent in Serena's direction, where she stood behind her husband's chair, "but he did, an' now I've got Jake to keep me company."

Serena's aunts looked surprised at the older man's confession, and Tess realized how much less grumpy Ian had been in the last month. Maybe Jacob *had* changed the man for the better. Before they had a chance to dwell on it, Ian insisted Noah and Pete go next, since they were the ones that needed distracting from the cake.

Noah opened his mouth, probably to say something flippant, but then jumped as if he'd been kicked under the table. Glaring at his brother, his mouth set in a mulish frown, he said, "What? I was gunna say I'm thankful for cake."

"I know," Pete snapped back, "But you're suppose'ta say something *nice*. You can't thank God for *cake*."

"Can too!"

"Can not!"

Molly cleared her throat, and when Pete shot her a guilty glance, asked calmly, "What are you thankful for, Peter?"

The older boy turned pink under all of their gazes, and locked his attention on his empty plate, before muttering something. It wasn't until his brother said "*Ha!*" that Tess realized Pete was thankful for cake as well. All of the adults smiled. Nate signed something to Annie, and she giggled in response.

"Well," said Agatha—or maybe Agnes—glancing at her sister, "We're thankful for the same thing we were last year…"

"Sebastian!" They said in unison, causing the man to lock his eyes on the ceiling with a long-suffering expression.

Serena's aunt continued. "He's dear, yes, and we're thankful he's made Serena so happy—"

Her sister picked up, "—but we're especially thankful that he figured out a way to marry her *and* keep her in Cheyenne, so we could all live there."

"As nice as this house is," the first twin looked around, "We don't really miss it, not when we have Serena and Sebastian—"

"—and Annie in Cheyenne." As the first time she met Serena's aunts, Tess was amazed at their ability to finish each other's sentences. Judging from others' smiles, they thought it was funny too.

"And besides, we're happy Ian is so happy here." She couldn't tell which of the sisters said that, but they both looked at Cam's father, then at each other, and blushed slightly. She wondered what *that* was all about, especially after her father-in-law scoffed.

Sebastian, charming as always, drew everyone's attention away from his host. "Well, I'm thankful for such a savvy business partner." He raised his glass in Cam's direction. "Investing in the Open Skye has been profitable, even after the first year. But we went over the numbers before dinner, and it looks like he'll be able to pay off the loan by next year."

Tess gasped, and grabbed her husband's hand. "Really? That soon?"

Cam smiled and twined his fingers through hers. "Yep. I've been selling off stock like crazy. No offense to Sebastian, but I want to own the land free and clear before we," she liked the way he included her in their future, "build the herd up again."

"I'm proud of you, husband."

Sebastian smiled. "And I'm glad I had the chance to partner with you." The two men exchanged a satisfied nod, and everyone who knew their history, and how they'd competed for the same woman, knew how significant their friendship really was.

Serena's hand was on her husband's shoulder. "Well, *I'm* thankful for Cam's marriage, just like Ian, because it's brought me a new friend." She smiled kindly at Tess, who found herself flushing slightly under the beautiful woman's regard. "I just know that Tess

and I are going to be close."

"Oh, indeed!" Molly chimed in. "Tess, we're so pleased to welcome you to our little community." She glanced down at her daughter, who had fallen asleep while nursing. Molly adjusted her shawl, and smiled fondly at the sweet little baby. "But I should probably say I'm thankful for little Rose. I am. I'm so pleased to have a daughter." She sent a mischievous look at Pete and Noah. "Someone to play dress-up with, and help me bake, and brush her hair…"

Her teasing has the desired effect. Both boys wrinkled their noses and said, in almost unison, "*Girl stuff*."

Ash's laugh was louder than everyone else's, and Tess, who'd never heard him laugh before, was startled. "I'm thankful for *all* of my family." He ruffled Pete's hair. "Especially my sons, who don't like to play dress-up or have their hair brushed. But having a wife who *likes* to bake, and do other 'girl stuff', and tries to make me happy…" Tess caught a flash of white in his beard and knew he was smiling. "That's something to be thankful for too."

As everyone nodded and murmured agreements about Molly's baking, he turned to his brother and jabbed an elbow at the smaller man. "Your turn."

Nate was hunched over the table, forearms bracketed his coffee mug. His long hair fell in front of his face, so Tess couldn't see his expression. He seemed sad, though, and everyone else accepted it, like they understood why. After a long moment, Nate sighed. "I guess I'm thankful for the Postal Service, and the railway. It's pretty remarkable to be able to write to a person who lives nine hundred miles away." He lowered his head—and his voice—further. "And sometimes, even get a letter back."

There was an uncomfortable silence. Tess knew that Nate missed Molly's sister terribly, and wondered if Wendy knew about her pining beau. Molly reached around her husband to pat her brother-in-law's arm. "Next year, Nate. I miss her too. She'll be here next year." The two of them shared a look, before Nate sighed again, and took another sip of coffee.

As if trying to cheer everyone up, Annie spoke. Tess knew it was a big deal for the deaf girl to be able to speak at all. "I am tankful foh my wohds." *I'm thankful for my words.* Such a sweet, heartfelt sentiment brought immediate smiles to the group gathered around the Thanksgiving tables.

Cam and Tess were the only ones left. Pushing his chair back, Cam stood and took a drowsing Jacob from his father. Resting the boy against one shoulder, he twined his fingers through Tess's. "I've been waiting patiently, but now it's my turn." He smiled down at his wife, and Tess felt her insides go all bubbly. Had she always felt this way at

his smile? Since the moment they met, he'd had the ability to make her feel special, cherished… it was only yesterday, though, that she understood that was 'love'. It was so freeing, that realization. She smiled in return.

"I've got a lot to be thankful for. Tessa agreeing to marry me, without even knowing me… well, I'll be thankful for that for the rest of my life. She gave me a son, and brought happiness to our house." His smile grew, until it crinkled the corner of those green eyes she loved so much. "And next spring, she's going to give me a daughter."

The table erupted in gasps and squeals and chuckles of surprise and pleasure. The ladies clamored over themselves to express their happiness, and pulled Tess in all directions to hug her. The men clasped Cam's hand and offered him congratulations, while he beamed proudly. Ian just sat back and nodded contentedly, until Tess heard Pete ask what the big deal was, and Cam's father was stuck explaining.

Yes, it was all the excitement such an announcement deserved, and Tess was again overwhelmed by the support and acceptance she felt surrounding her. Last week, she would have called it 'neighborly', but now she knew the truth. These people were her friends, and she felt a kind of love for all of them… and was buoyed by their love as well. *This* was what life must be all about, this feeling of happiness and completeness. Being surrounded by friends and loved ones, and knowing that she was loved as well. She tore herself away from her musings, to wrap one arm around Cam's waist. The top of her head didn't even reach his shoulder, so she had to tilt her head back to look into his eyes.

"I haven't gotten to go yet, husband." There was a bit of a hush as their friends closest to them quieted to hear what she was thankful for.

"Jacob and I were happy… at least, I thought we were. I worked hard, and didn't know anyone, and didn't have any help. I was empty—although I didn't know it—and Jacob was all I had." She swallowed, and pressed her cheek to his chest. "Then you saved us, and I felt this… this *pull*. Like, I knew I could be happy with you. So I took a chance and said yes to you." She took a deep breath, and let it out, listening to his heartbeat. "It was the best thing I've ever done. You've given us a home, a place. You've given us love and acceptance and happiness." She looked him in the eyes again. "You've introduced me to good friends, and shown me how wonderful life can be." He didn't say anything, just stared down at her, cradling her—their—son tenderly. "So I guess I'm thankful for *you*, Cam, and the way you love me unconditionally." She took another deep breath, and held it, seeing the hope sparkling in his eyes. "And I'm thankful that you've taught

me *how* to love. I love you, Cam. I have for a long time, but didn't know it."

She heard Nate mutter "It's about time," but couldn't tear her eyes away from Cam's, and the joy she saw brimming. She loved this man more than she ever dreamed possible, and looked forward to a lifetime of proving it.

They were both smiling when their lips met, and the room erupted in cheers and laughter again.



While everyone was helping themselves to Molly's desserts, Cam handed his now-wide-awake son off to Serena, and snagged Tess's hand. Ignoring her protests that she needed to help clear the table, he pulled her across the foyer and into his study. It had been his favorite room in the house before he'd met her, and now that her projects—sewing and otherwise—were there too, it felt even more like home. He looked forward to many a winter evening spent here working, just the two of them.

For now, though, the room was dark and chilly. He kicked the door closed behind him and pulled her closer to the window, where he could see her expressions. She just stood there, her hands resting on his hips, and watched him expectantly. Unable to help himself, he brushed fingertips across her cheeks, and through her hair. Did she even realize how beautiful she was? Her high cheekbones, creamy skin, and exotic eyes were her father's legacy, but her beauty was all her own.

She caught his hand, then, spreading her fingers against his. Seeing their hands, pressed palm-to-palm, made Cam marvel at their size difference. He could probably enclose her whole hand in his; he towered over her. But he'd never felt oafish or intimidating with her, like he had around other petite women; Tess accepted him the way he was, and, *thank God*, loved him.

"Cam?" Hell, he even loved her whisper, "Don't you want some dessert? You'll miss Molly's cake."

The absurdity of it pulled a sudden chuckle from him, which continued to build into a laugh when her expression turned confused. She'd just confessed her love for him; he was about to force her to tell him again, and she was worried about *dessert*?

"Sorry, love," He managed to choke out while he calmed his laughter. "It's just that *how* could you possibly think I'm worried about cake? I've got all the sweets I want right here." It was a dumb line, sure, but he kissed her anyway. From the way she kissed him back,

she didn't mind.

But after, her brows dipped. He loved the little furrow that appeared between them when she was angry or confused. He resisted the urge to kiss it. "Cam, I'm not sweet. I'm serious, most of the time. I can't be like you."

"Like me?"

"You're so… I always know what you're feeling or thinking. You're smiling or yelling or laughing. I'm not like that."

"I know." He did kiss her brow then. "And I love you for it. I love everything about you, Teresa Li Kitchens MacLeod. My Tessa."

"I understand now, Cam. I didn't before." She sighed and wrapped her arms around him, pressing her cheek to his chest. "Today I'm thankful not just for the way you love me, but for the way you taught me to love you."

His caught his breath at her words, so much more casual than her declaration in the dining room. Tilting her chin back so that he could see her eyes, he whispered, "Tell me again, Tessa."

"I love you, Cameron MacLeod. I've loved you for the longest time, but didn't realize what love *was*. My life began the moment I married you."

Cam exhaled, and felt the peace wrap around him. The future stretched out in front of them, filled with possibilities… but for now, just knowing that she loved him made everything right in his world.

"Cam?"

"You were slow, then, sweetheart." Her brow dipped again, and he knew she didn't understand. "Remember how we met? You tried to attack me, thinking I was hurting Jacob."

Her smile was rueful, almost. "I just remember being terrified. I didn't start thinking again until I was on top of you, and realized you'd protected us even then."

"Well, I knew then that you were something special. And when I sat you on my lap for that ride to the Fort, I knew you could make me happy." He dropped a kiss to her lips, then, gentle and over too fast. "But when I walked into that room a few days later, and I saw the way your face—your beautiful face—lit up when you saw me… Well, that's when I knew that *I* could make *you* happy, if you just gave me the chance."

"Oh, Cam…" There were tears in her eyes, and that made him smile again.

"Thanksgiving's a time to count our blessings, right? Well, I know I will thank God every day for the rest of my life that you said 'yes' to me that night."

She didn't say anything, just stared up at him. He started to get uncomfortable, wondering if he'd said something wrong. "Tessa?"

“Yes?”

“Are you alright?”

Suddenly, and surprisingly, she burst into laughter. She had to jump to reach her arms around his neck, but he picked her up to hold her close. “Oh, Cam!” She was still laughing, that husky, full laugh he so rarely heard. “I have never, in my life, been better. Thank you! Thank you for…”

He cut her off with a kiss that went and wrapped around his heart and dipped clear into the pit of his stomach. He could feel the slight bulge of her womb, and knew their child—the one they’d created out of shared passion and respect—would stand as a sign of their love.

“I love you, Tessa.”

And then, the words he’d despaired of hearing for so long: “I love you, Cam.”

He had the ranch he’d always dreamed of, and a supportive father. He had a healthy son and another baby on the way. And most importantly, he had a loving wife.

He was finally home.

AUTHOR'S NOTE
On Historical Accuracy



The benefit of setting a historic story outside of a city is that the author has more flexibility. After all, the reader *knows* that the Open Skye ranch is a fictional construct, but understands that it is representative of so many similarly-sized cattle ranches that spread across the American west after the cattle boom. Thus, the author doesn't *have* to conform to specific incidents and places from history, as a story set in a town or city would have to (see the Author's Note at the end of *A Cheyenne Celebration*).

That said, *A Cheyenne Thanksgiving* is not without its historical framework. Fort Laramie, for instance, was very much a real place. Founded in 1834 as a trading post at the confluence of the North Platte and Laramie Rivers, it was taken over by the US Army in 1849 and used as a base to protect the settlers and wagon trains on the Oregon Trail. In the late '60s and throughout the '70s, the fort was used as an important Army staging point for the various wars with the nearby Native Americans (the Great Sioux War of 1876 was set off when gold was discovered in the Black Hills, and settlers began to encroach on Sioux territory). But by the late 1880s Fort Laramie's relevance decreased, with most of the local Native Americans "pacified" and the railroad replacing wagon trains as the primary means of transport west. It was eventually decommissioned in 1890.

Fort Laramie's commandants are well-recorded, and Colonel John Gibbon would have been in charge in 1882 (although the Newells are entirely imaginary, and some artistic license has been taken with regards to the fort's social whirl). Gibbon entered West Point Military Academy in 1842. After fighting in both the Mexican War and the Seminole Wars, he returned to the academy as an artillery instructor, where he wrote the definitive textbook on the subject that was used for many years (*The Artillerist's Manual*, 1859). He met and married his wife Frances (née Moale) before the Civil War began. When it did, he was forced to choose between his chosen career in the US Army, and his family in Charlotte, NC. He opted to

continue with the Army, and thus fought against three of his brothers, who joined the Confederate forces. After the War Between the States ended, he was sent west to protect the interests of the white settlers. He was influential in the Sioux Campaign of 1876 (during which he led the troop that buried the remains of Custer's 7th Cavalry after Little Big Horn) and the Nez Perce Campaign of 1877. He commanded a series of Forts ranged from Wisconsin to Washington, and down through the Dakotas and Utah. He retired as a General to Baltimore, where he passed away shortly before his seventieth birthday, having given fifty courageous and bloody years of service to the US Army.

The story itself touches on various historic instances, if not characters. For instance, Tess learns all about the early history of Thanksgiving, the date of which is slightly different from today. President Lincoln made Thanksgiving a federal holiday in 1863, declaring it to be the last Thursday of November. But in 1939, President Roosevelt moved it to the next-to-the-last Thursday in November, making the time between Thanksgiving and Christmas a full week longer (and thus allowing more purchasing time for Christmas gifts). The country was in uproar over this change (mainly divided along party lines), and for three years each state chose which Thanksgiving to celebrate (and some celebrated *both* days as government holidays!). In 1942, Congress, the Senate, and the President finally compromised; a federal law was passed making Thanksgiving the fourth Thursday of November (regardless of how many weeks the month had).

Finally, a few notes have to be made about the backdrop of Cam and Tess's story. The Highland Clearances were a very real event, resulting in thousands of people being pushed off of their land and immigrating to the Americas. As a result, there are more people of Highland decent living in Glengarry County, Ontario than there are in the Scottish Highlands themselves.

This forced immigration, and so many other factors, resulted in a breed of men pushed westward, determined to beat the odds and create a successful life. Cattle ranching was a profitable—and when Cam founded the Open Skye, foolproof—enterprise. But a severe drought in 1886 popped the "beef bubble", and in November of that year the cattle prices dropped to half of what they were two years before. The brutal winter of that year cut herds by as much as a quarter, devastating cattle ranches even further. It is depressing to know that this is in Cam's future, yes, but he's lucky enough to be selling off his beeves (archaic plural of "beef") now. Hopefully, the cattle depression will not hit him as hard as it will hit his neighbors.

You will be able to check up on Cam and Tess and their

growing family in A Cheyenne Christmas Homecoming, the last installment of *The Sweet Cheyenne Quartet*. In it, we will finally see Nate discover the love that he deserves… assuming he can convince Wendy that she's worthy of it. Keep reading for a sneak peek!

And if you want to read up on Cam and Sebastian's history, and find out just how they ended up in business together, be sure to check out *A Cheyenne Celebration*.



If you've enjoyed the history behind *A Cheyenne Thanksgiving*, I urge you to find me on Facebook or follow me on Twitter, where I frequently post fascinating pieces of social history that I find while researching. Do you like reading historical westerns, and like hanging out with others who do too? Join us on the Pioneer Hearts Facebook page, where we have the most wonderful discussions, contests, and updates about new books!

Now that I've finished the five books in the apparently inaccurately named *Sweet Cheyenne Quartet,* I've started on a new series of Fairy Tales set in the Old West called *Everland Ever After*. If you'd like to keep up with my stories, or read deleted scenes, or receive exclusive free books, sign up for my newsletter.

Reviews help other readers find books they'll love!
All feedback is read and appreciated.



From *A Cheyenne Christmas Homecoming*

Thanksgiving, 1883

The holiday dinner had been phenomenal, to no-one's surprise. It was the Barkers' turn to host this year, and though the Carderocks had opted to stay in town, the MacLeods rode over from their nearby ranch. It had been a nice time, and with Molly's cooking, delicious as well. Old Ian had brought his famous dressing, and Ash had requested Tess make her Chinese father's rice-and-vegetable dish. Nate didn't like it, but heard Molly say that Wendy would have liked to try it. He agreed. She had always loved to learn new things about new people.

Pete and Noah had enjoyed having an entire day to play with Jacob, and Cam's latest addition was passed around happily. Little Mae had more of her mother's dark coloring than her big brother Jacob did, and that made her cuter, in Nate's biased opinion. She was able to sit up, now, and Ash's youngest Rose kept toddling over to bring her baby dolls or her brothers' blocks. The little girls seemed best friends already.

Cam was as good a man as any in Nate's opinion, and he was glad his friend had found the happiness and family he'd deserved. A few years before, he'd seen how empty Cam had been, how much the older man wanted the belonging and acceptance a family could bring. Now it was Cam's turn at happiness, and as they piled into the wagon to head back to the Open Skye—the MacLeod ranch—Cam lingered on the porch with Nate.

He looked every inch the proud papa, with little Mae tucked sleepily against his shoulder. Nate nodded at the baby. "She suits you. *Fatherhood* suits you."

"Yeah." Cam lacked Ash's ability to hide his feelings; the older man's face bloomed in a smile. "You've got no idea, Nate. Last year, even *I* had no idea. But being married to a woman I love, who loves me, who's given me two healthy kids… that's… well, that's the best thing I could've hoped for."

Nate didn't reply. He didn't particularly need kids of his own, not with all of the little ones already running around. But to come home every day to a woman who loved him…? That would be pretty incredible.

Something must have shown on his face, or else Cam knew him well enough to understand the direction of his thoughts, because his friend's expression softened. Cam switched the baby to his left side, and put out his hand. "I'm sorry, Nate."

Forcing a small grin for Cam's sake, Nate shook his friend's hand. "Don't be. I'm really happy for you. You got what you deserved."

"And you'll get it too." Cam squeezed, and then let go. "I had to wait a long time, you know. There's a lot of heartache before you find this kind of happiness." Nate snorted at the platitude, and Cam smiled. "Yeah, I know. But one day soon you'll look back and you won't even be able to remember this pain."

"Hope so." Nate turned to watch the little boys chasing each other around the wagon, while Tess and Molly chatted. Cam propped one hip against the porch railing, and rubbed his daughter's back. A long moment passed before Nate cleared his throat. "You got any ideas how?"

He heard Cam sigh. "No. You still haven't heard from her?"

“Nope.”

“Then you’ve got to figure out where your future lies. If it’s with her, you have to make it happen. If it’s not, if she’s part of your past, then you’ve got to figure out how to let her go.”

Nate snorted, and tucked his hands into his armpits, wishing he’d put on his coat to come out. “Easy to say, harder to do.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve got a whole winter ahead of you to think. So think about it.”

Turning to his friend, Nate raised one brow. “You honestly believe I ever think about anything else?”

There was a small grin on Cam’s lips, but pity in his eyes, when the older man said “No, I guess not.” When Tess came to bundle up Mae for the ride home, Cam pulled his hat down around his ears, and sent a smile towards the younger man. “Good luck, Nate.”

“Thanks.” And then, long after Molly had herded the boys inside, and Ash and Annie had wandered off towards the stables, Nate stood on the porch, staring at the place where the MacLeods had disappeared over the ridge, thinking about what his friend had said: “I’ll need it.”



Don’t worry! You can catch up with the MacLeods and watch Nate finally decide what to do about Wendy in *A Cheyenne Christmas Homecoming*, available now.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Caroline Lee is what George R.R. Martin once described as a "gardener author"; she delights in creating interesting and lovable characters, and allowing them to lead their own stories. Often they draw the story along to completely unexpected--and wonderful!--places. She considers a story a success if she can re-read it and sigh dreamily... and she wishes the same for you.

A love of historical romance prompted Caroline to pursue her degrees in social history; her Master's Degree is in Comparative World History, which is the study of themes across history (for instance, 'domestication of animals throughout the world,' or 'childhood through history'). Her theme? You guessed it: Marriage throughout world history. Her favorite focus was periods of history that brought two disparate peoples together to marry, like marriage in the Levant during the Kingdom of Jerusalem, or marriage between convicts in colonial New South Wales. She hopes that she's able to bring this love of history-- and this history of love-- to her novels.

Caroline is living her own little Happily Ever After with her husband and sons in North Carolina.

Other works by Caroline Lee

The Sweet Cheyenne Quartet

A Cheyenne Christmas
A Cheyenne Celebration
A Cheyenne Thanksgiving
A Cheyenne Christmas Homecoming
Where They Belong: A Sweet Cheyenne Christmas Novella
The Mothers of Sweet Cheyenne: A short story collection

Everland Ever After

Little Red (Rojita + Hank)
Ella (Ella + Ian)
Beauty (Arabella + Vincenzo)

Sign up for Caroline's Newsletter to receive exclusive content and freebies, as well as first dibs on her books!